

PATT, JULIA K., M.F.A. *The Girl in the Deer & Other Tales of the Pre-Apocalypse*. (2012)

Directed by Holly Goddard Jones. 89 pp.

The Rapture. Global Warming. December 21, 2012. Culturally, we're more than a little obsessed with the end of the world. Much of our current literature, film, and television depicts the details of the apocalypse or the post-apocalypse. But what about the breath just before the much-anticipated end? The era in which we believe we live—the years before the world ends either by divine hand, ecological disaster, or long-foreseen portent. The following four short stories seek to define and explore this time, which has been marked by economic depression and social stagnation, and the people who populate this pre-apocalypse. These characters struggle most not with global but personal cataclysms, the ways in which their lives seem to crumble and fall apart, the ways in which the world, whether about to end or not, fails to meet their expectations. And, as is often the case on the cusp of great changes, the events of their lives take a turn for the strange and the unexpected.

THE GIRL IN THE DEER & OTHER TALES OF THE PRE-APOCALYPSE

by

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A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro
2012

Approved by

Committee Chair

For Mom, Dad, Liz & Mike

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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NIGHT PEOPLE, IN SUMMER

We moved during the summer—summer, Mom said, because it was easier than moving during the school year, and summer, Dad said, because Mom started her new job in July, but summer really because that’s when the money ran out and they lost the house and we had to go. So we moved in with Grandmother on the other side of the city with our few boxes and suitcases and the furniture Mom couldn’t bear to leave behind. No movers, just Dad sweating through his t-shirt, me and Mom helping. It would be the hottest summer on record. The temperature had already crept close to triple digits by the time we unpacked the car. After, we sat around in the kitchen drinking sweating glasses of lemonade.

Grandmother kept a tall skinny row house near the harbor: two bedrooms, a little yellow kitchen, one of those stuffy, old-fashioned parlors, a basement—where I was forbidden to play—and an attic, where I would sleep. I shared it with Grandmother’s Christmas decorations, boxes of bulbs and ornaments stacked high against the walls. Even though Grandmother kept the place quite clean, a scattering of dry pine needles from old trees always littered the attic floor. There was a small window at either end of the room, but they were shuttered and latched like a pair of hard-closed eyes. I slept under the street-side window in a little cot, even though I was eleven and already four inches too tall for it.

“Can we open the window?” I asked Mom that first night. I had already sat up to undo to the latch, let the night air in, although that felt strange. At home, we almost never opened the windows; there was central air and I slept under the covers even in August.

Mom paused. She was unpacking my clothes, putting them in a wooden dresser Dad had brought up from the basement. It had been his, he told me, and kissed me on the head. There was a long scar up the side where he’d scratched it with a Matchbox car. Mom turned away from the dresser, braced the heels of her hands against it. “Your Grandmother doesn’t like to have the windows open,” she said. “She says it’s not safe.”

““But it’s hot.” Already, the sheets stuck to my legs. Mom’s face was flushed. The heat seemed stoppered in that attic, trapped in the narrow rafters. Outside, cool air rode in from the water, and I imagined the breezes pushing against the side of that shut-up house like waves against the docks. “And it smells funny in here.” It did, like cough syrup and cedar.

Mom sighed and came over to me. There were new lines on her face, just from that moving day. “It’s very kind of your Grandmother to let us stay,” she said. “We should respect her rules.” But I could tell she didn’t like it either. She smoothed my hair back from my face, and her skin was as warm as mine. “You’ll get used to it,” she said. “We all will. It’ll be better than you think, you’ll see. It’ll be an adventure.”

After she left and turned out the lights, I lay there with my hand against the window glass and tried to feel the outside air, listened to the sounds from the street. A car backfired, glass shattered on the sidewalk, a group of people walked by, loud and laughing. The house settled around me, groaning in a way our old house never did.

Something rustled in the walls. Downstairs, my parents and Grandmother went to bed, one door and then the other closing. Once I thought I heard footsteps, and, then, just before I fell asleep, the tinny sound of music playing very far away.

The next morning, I went looking for the few treasures I'd brought with me. The gold hoop earrings Mom gave me after I got my ears pierced. My favorite teddy, even though I was too old for him, a thin raggedy bear with one button eye missing. The small nothings I'd collected at camp the previous year—smooth stones from the lake, friendship bracelets woven from string, an iridescent turkey feather, postcards from my friends at home. That morning, already hot, waking up in the attic, I decided I needed them, wanted to run my thumb over the lake stone, to feel the weight of the earrings. But they were nowhere to be found.

“Stuff gets misplaced in a move,” Dad explained, a little sad when I told him. “Are you sure you didn’t put them in the storage unit?”

“Maybe,” I said, although I knew I hadn’t. The earrings and the bear and the box of camp memories had all been in my favorite suitcase, the red one, unpacked the night before.

Later in the week, Mom asked me, “Have you been using my perfume again?” Her face, damp with sweat as it always was now, looked sterner than I could remember seeing it, her mouth tight and small and puckered, as if it was drawn shut with a string.

“No,” I said. In our old house, I would have stolen squirts of perfume and dabs of make-up. But there was no one to show off for here—all of my friends lived on the other side of town. Mom didn’t say anything else. She walked away muttering in a way she

never had before we moved. She snapped at Grandmother while they were making dinner and again at Dad before she put me to bed.

After that, it was Grandmother's brandy—she asked if Dad had had a nightcap and he hadn't. Then Dad's reading glasses went missing, although they always reappeared in another place, usually somewhere strange, like the breadbox or inside the record player or once in Grandmother's hatbox. Nothing valuable ever disappeared, not money or Grandmother's silver or Mom's jewelry. It was the books no one finished, the gloves I'd worn the winter before, the umbrella with the broken spoke. And because it was only that, they never thought anything of it, talked the disappearances away. At night, I sat awake and listened. The same sounds of footsteps on the stair, the same hallway creaks. Sometimes I turned my head, just missing, I thought, a flash of movement—but there wasn't anyone there.

Two weeks after we moved to Grandmother's, Mom started working again. She had a night shift as a nurse at the hospital, 9pm-5am, six days a week. She got home just as the sun was coming up. The front door would creak and her soft shoes would make dull noises in the foyer and she would start the coffee pot. Then Dad got up. Sometimes I crept to the second floor to watch them before they parted—her off to bed and him to look for work at the harbor. They always stopped in the middle of the stairs, Mom still in her scrubs. "Five words about your night," Dad would say. His face was the same blue-gray color as the light coming in the windows, that pre-dawn glow full of shadows and streetlights.

She'd tell him—how busy it was at the hospital or how slow, a patient who'd gotten better or worse, the overbearing supervisor, the one friend she'd made on her shift—and he'd kiss her and they'd part as the sun rose bleakly over the pavement. When Mom came up the stairs, I scurried back to the attic and climbed into bed. Sometimes I fell back asleep. More often, I lay awake, listening to Dad down in the kitchen, the clink of ceramic cups and plates, the gurgle of the coffee pot, his heavy work shoes on the floorboards. Outside, the city woke up, too—dogs barking and cars grumbling to life and people closing their front doors and the bus yawning to a stop at the corner. If I listened hard enough, I imagined I could hear the crews out on the boats, even though the water was a few blocks away, cranes lowering cargo or fishermen loading gear, men jumping from dock to deck, never missing. When I was smaller, Mom and Dad took me out to see the boats in the afternoons, pointed out the big flat barges and the sailboats and the luxury yachts, all of them just dots in the blue.

Some mornings, I was still lying there thinking about the boats when Grandmother came to wake me for breakfast. Then we'd watch her morning programs, mostly game shows, together on the plastic-covered sofa in front of the spinning fan. TV was all there was—and Scrabble, but Grandmother always beat me. No internet. Mom got up around lunchtime and spent the afternoons going through the classifieds while Grandmother and I watched the afternoon programs, mostly soaps, and drank watery lemonade. The four of us had dinners together—and Thursdays, Mom's night off—but that was it.

It was around then the messes started in the kitchen. A dirty skillet on the stove. Batter splattered on the countertops. Coffee mugs on the kitchen table, pressing wet rings into the wood. Once we found the shards of a plate in the trash. Another time, the whole place reeked of burnt bacon, grease everywhere. One afternoon, Grandmother asked Mom if she wouldn't mind cleaning up after she cooked in the morning.

"But I *don't* cook anything," Mom said. They were in the kitchen, making sandwiches. Mom pursed her lips and Grandmother folded her arms and they looked at each other like that for a good while. I went into the living room to watch cartoons, wished I had someone to whisper to, to make jokes with while they argued, their voices thin and high. It seemed like every angry word they said, the hotter the house got, filled up with that heady, heavy heat, like the air just before it stormed, except it never did. At home I would have been able to leave, to walk down the block to a friend's or the park. But here I didn't know where to go and Mom said I shouldn't go out because the neighborhood wasn't great, wasn't *safe* as Grandmother said, too dangerous to even open the windows. So we stayed indoors.

When I woke up the next morning, just before Mom got home, the attic was cool and I breathed in the sunrise air, fresh off the water, the first deep breath I'd taken, it seemed, since we moved in. I remembered, somewhere from sleep, the sense of someone else being in the room, leaning over me, a cool hand on my cheek, the window opening. Mom, I thought, but not much later the front door opened and her soft tread came into the hall and Dad went downstairs and they stopped and talked. I ran my fingers over the windowsill and looked out onto the street, the houses across from ours, the water beyond

them, pink with sun. And there, on the corner of the sill, was one of my little gold hoop earrings. It caught the light. Glimmered. I curled my fingers around it and fell asleep, listening to the traffic on the street below, the harbor breeze on my face.

Later, when Grandmother came in to wake me, she scowled at the open window. She stomped down to the guest room. I hurried after her in my pajamas and crouched on the attic stairs, listening. Mom was shouting. “I didn’t open them, although I should have. It’s a wonder she doesn’t suffocate in there, the way you shut this place up.” And then Grandmother— “This is my house. And I don’t ask much but you can’t just do whatever you want.” They didn’t speak the rest of the day. Mom left right after lunch, said she needed to go for a walk. I knew without asking that I wasn’t allowed to go with her. I sat with Grandmother while she thumbed through *Reader’s Digest*, and I rolled the earring between my palms. The house was quiet, just the sound of pages turning and the fan buzzing back and forth.

That evening, when Dad got home and Mom hadn’t left yet, I could hear them talking in low snagged voices. “Your mother,” and “have to be patient” and “we can’t do this.”

Later, after their door closed and then Grandmother’s, I heard voices downstairs, the same creaks and groans I’d heard before, and music, the faraway sound of someone singing low and throaty. I unfolded from my little cot under the window; my footsteps were quiet on the attic floor. Moonlight came through the shutters, threw my shadow strangely—like a bird’s—as I crept across the room. I went down the narrow attic stairs, one at a time, pausing and listening when I stopped. Yes, there were voices; there were

people laughing. Real people, not something on television, I thought, not something small and trapped in the speakers. Real laughter. I went down the stairs, feeling light and small and soundless. I was so careful to be quiet that I almost fell over the girl.

I didn't see her at first; she was only a shade or two lighter than the darkest corners of the attic. But she was there, sprawled across the landing with a blank book in her lap. She was older than I was; by how much it was hard to tell. From one angle she looked sixteen, from another, twenty-five. Her face was indistinct, like seeing yourself reflected in a dark window. A solid shadow dressed in hand-me-down clothing, nothing that fit her, the shirt too tight and the pants too loose, the shoes unlaced, their tongues flapping. Her lank hair fell around her face. She looked at me with her big, pale eyes, the eyes of something that's lived underwater for a long time. She smelled like the harbor, a damp, smoky smell, and when she reached out to steady me, her hand was cold but moist, like water condensed on a glass.

"And then they all lived in the land of Night forever and ever," she said, pretending to read aloud from the blank book. "The end. Beautiful story. Do you like reading?"

I stood and watched her, wary.

"You must be the girl," she said, as if I had replied. She had a voice like musty attic air, slow and still and stale. "What's your name?"

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Reading," the girl said and rolled her eyes. "Did I scare you?"

"No," I said.

“Tell me your name, then.”

“Alice,” I told her, although it wasn’t. But it was the name I wanted—at least at eleven. “What’s yours?”

“Don’t remember,” the night girl said. “Or I never had one. But come on.” She stood, the length of her oozing up from the stair. She grabbed my hand in her clammy one and I followed her down into our Grandmother’s house, which had gone dark and cold like the inside of a cave. Every window in the place was open, letting the city in—that wet exhaust smell and the sound of cars way off.

“Nicer this way, isn’t it?” the girl said and we walked past the guest room where my father slept alone, the door cracked open just in case I called him during the night, although I never did. I peered in at him through the crack; he was curled up like a kid and only took up his half of the bed, leaving the other side for Mom. The night girl stood with me, looking at him, and then she reached across me to tug the door all the way shut. Then, Grandmother’s room, closed up tight. Flowered wallpaper covered the hallway—dark, bloody roses crept up and down greedy green vines.

Downstairs, there were a dozen people like the girl lounging around Grandmother’s old-fashioned sitting room. They were all the same shade of blue-gray, their faces vague, out of focus, their clothing loose and ragged. Goodwill clothes, Grandmother would have said. Welfare people. They’d stripped the plastic covers from the couches, rearranged the furniture so they could put their feet up on the coffee table. They smoked, tapped their ashes out onto chipped saucers, drank coffee from Grandmother’s mugs. A drowsy blues song wound around the room; they’d taken out

Dad's old turntable, blown the dust from it, found the records he left behind when he married Mom. Album jackets splayed on the carpet like fallen leaves, the men and women on the covers staring up at us, sad-eyed and graying. A few of the people gathered in the living room sang along with the music; their voices were rough from smoking and drinking and whispering. When the night girl came by with me in tow, they nodded at her and waved at us and grinned, their teeth very white—very sharp.

The kitchen stank of burnt butter. It was dark and I reached for the switch, but the girl stopped me, put one hand over mine, and shook her head. There were two other night people in there, a man and a woman making breakfast, the way my parents did before we moved. A stack of pancakes teetered on one plate. Not the perfect round pancakes my mother made, but uneven, asymmetrical shapes, some of them like crooked stars, others like claws reaching out. The percolator bubbled and murmured. The night woman offered me a pancake and a cup of coffee and I took both and sat at Grandmother's little kitchen table, which was already sticky with maple syrup. I'd never had coffee before, but I tipped the mug back. It was bitter and sludgy and thick and I gagged on it. But the pancake was good and I ate it drowned in syrup. I could hear the people singing in the other room, a lonely song I didn't recognize.

The next day, I got up early, thinking to close the windows, to put the furniture back where it belonged, to soak the blackened pans in the sink. But when I got up, all the windows were closed; the sofa covered neatly in plastic again, the plates washed and put away. I stood in the kitchen in my pajamas until Grandmother came down. She ghosted her hand over my hair, smoothing it back from my face. "You're up early," she said and

went about getting things for breakfast, putting out plates, filling her cup with coffee.

“The heat wave is supposed to break today,” she told me. “You can feel it already, can’t you?”

I didn’t tell her about the lingering taste of syrup on my tongue, the music my father had once liked skipping across my thoughts, a dozen pairs of big pale eyes looking back at me, the embers of their cigarettes glowing in the dark room, the air coming off the water, that cool air filling the house, filling my lungs, the girl’s hand in mine. I sat at the kitchen table while Grandmother talked, and everything she said washed over me. Maybe I could have reached out, grabbed something she said and held on, come back to the little yellow kitchen where she made me toast and scrambled eggs—“Your father must have had eggs this morning, too, we’re almost out”—but it wasn’t the right kitchen, no leaning stack of pancakes, no batter dripping onto the linoleum, no laughter drifting in from the other room. That afternoon, I toyed with the earring again and the clasp bit into the fleshy part of my hand. Mom sat at the kitchen table with the Classifieds and she and Grandmother didn’t fight. We all sat, quiet, not talking, and I strained to hear the world outside, pretended all the windows were still open.

After I kissed Mom goodbye as she left for the hospital and Dad tucked me in and the guest room door and Grandmother’s door closed, the girl came and sat on the edge of my bed. Her eyes caught the dim light like a cat’s, glowed green. “Want to see something?” she asked, and I nodded.

She took me down to the street, me still in my pajamas. The street was full of people, night people like before, all blue and ragged and not quite solid—more of them

than had been in the house the previous night. They crowded the sidewalk, leaned against the garbage cans, perched on Grandmother's front steps. A group of boys kicked around cans and tossed empty beer bottles down the street where they shattered. Then another night person brought over a radio and stretched out the long silver antenna—livelier music than the blues song—and they all danced and the girl took my hands and spun me around and all of us laughed, even me. The streetlights cast faint beams across the street, throwing our shadows under us and they were dancing too, the shadows of the night people tossing their arms up and spinning each other until they fell over dizzy. Two men grabbed me by the hands and swung me, my legs kicking high in the air, and I shrieked. I thought then someone would come to the window, would tell us to be quiet, but no one did and we danced until the clouds went violet overhead and the few stars we could see in the city faded into the sky. I went to bed humming and snapping my fingers and I dreamed of the rough pavement under my feet. The next morning I couldn't see a radio or any people, only the brown splintered shards of bottle glass in the gutter.

The next night, we sat and listened to records and ate bacon and played with the ceramic figures on Grandmother's mantel, the little girls with sheep and the little boys with dogs and the sleeping cats and carefully poised deer and delicate, thin-stemmed flowers in tiny glass vases. With the night girl helping, I sent the boys and girls on an adventure through the living room, and they collected flowers for a wicked old witch. While we were playing, we broke one of the little boy figurines and hid it under the cupboard. We left grease on the parlor pillows and the parlor curtains, and some of the other night people stood in the kitchen, talking and smoking and drinking inches of

Grandmother's brandy from thick tumblers. They took out her pill bottles—long rows of orange plastic tubes in the kitchen cupboards—and stole a pill or two from each. Flicked them across the countertops with their fingertips. That night they didn't clean up and the next day, Grandmother and Mom fought in the kitchen again. Grandmother held the broken pieces of the boy figurine and shouted at Mom, tears in her eyes. They didn't remember to send me away from the kitchen table like they would have once.

A week later, the girl came and woke me, put a hand over my mouth to keep me quiet, and we snuck out into the street again. I didn't see any night people, wanted to ask her where they all were, but I stayed quiet, followed her through the streets, down one narrow alley and then another and finally we were at the marina, all the bright, artificial city lights reflected in the water, the boats lined up and tethered to the docks, sleek and white and shining. And there were the night people bathing in the moonlight, stretched out on beach towels with stripes of pale lotion on their noses, big floppy summer hats, sunglasses. Some of them in borrowed bikinis and trunks, others naked, their bodies strange and colorless, as if they were made of ashes. The night girl and I watched them for a while as they shifted and turned, lighting up their skins in the moonlight. And then for no reason I could tell, they all got up from the docks and jumped into the Bay, made the water frothy with splashing, and vanished into the cold, inky dark.

Dad came home early the next afternoon. "Thought we might go down to the harbor before it gets too dark, kiddo, what do you say?" And I told him I was tired, that it was too hot.

Sometimes, we didn't go anywhere. The night girl just sat and told me stories, the kinds of stories my parents had read me once, adventure stories. She sat on the edge of my bed and told me about brave little girls hunting buried treasure or finding magic rings or battling dragons. The usual fairy tales. Of course, none of her little girls had blonde ringlets or skin as fair as snow. They were all night people, like her, and they crept past evil queens and sinister magicians easily, hid themselves in the shadows the way the night people did. Her heroines only came out after sunset, spent the day behind closet doors and under beds and inside of kitchen cabinets. The endings were never quite right either; no one lived happily ever after. When I asked what happened to the night people in the stories, she shrugged. "Went to go live in some old house, I guess." Then she smoothed my hair and told me another one.

They taught me to make pancakes, to flip them high and catch them in a hot pan. They played me the same songs over and over—sad songs and dancing songs, all of them sung in that same smoky tone and even the lively songs were full of broken hearts. They blew smoke rings for me from stolen cigarettes, wound their blue-gray fingers in my hair, sang me lullabies. When I went to bed in the early mornings, there was always one of them, usually the girl, crooning some gentle melody about hushing and not worrying.

If I was lethargic during the day, it never bothered Grandmother much. She preferred my low energy. "It's just hot," I told Mom when she asked if I wasn't feeling okay. But really, I was dreaming of the night, of the sound of glass breaking in the alley and the yellow glow of streetlights and the smell of black bitter coffee and the way a turntable needle scratches a vinyl record. I stopped seeing the bags under Mom's eyes or

the way Dad's skin had gone pale, stopped hearing the sharpness in Grandmother's tone, the false brightness of her television shows, stopped missing my friends across the city, stopped hoping, more than anything, for Dad to find a job to get us out of there, to get us back to our clean cool house and my friends down the block and the park and the flatscreen TV in the family room. I had the breeze off the Bay and the feeling of dancing in a crowd and the night girl, her hand in mine, guiding me through the darkened city streets.

Once, Mom came to me before she left for work and kissed my forehead and said, "This isn't forever, you know. We'll be out of here soon and you'll be able to play with your friends and run and we'll go watch the boats with Dad just like we used to. I promise."

Then it was August and the humidity seemed thick enough to hold, and even when the night people opened the windows, the air sat heavy in the house. Sometimes we could only lounge around, not moving much, let the rotating fan send its small breezes across the room. We listened to slow-moving music and the night people were quiet, curled up in the furniture. "What's wrong?" I asked, but they only shook their heads. They're waiting, I decided. They're waiting for the weather to break. Then, one night, one of those nights it was supposed to storm and didn't, Mom and Dad shut the guest room door and talked. Once or twice, their voices got louder, angrier, but mostly they stayed level and then I could hear Dad saying, "Okay. Okay. You're right."

When I woke up just after midnight, the night girl wasn't there. It wasn't so strange; sometimes she waited in the living room with the others or sat at the bottom of

the attic stairs. I crept down them like I had that first night, one step and then the next, quiet like they were, careful not to make a sound, not to wake Dad and Grandmother. There, on the bottom step, something glittered. The other earring. It was a little dusty but otherwise fine, and I closed my hand around it. Farther down the hall, I found Mom's gloves. Grandmother's small shoes from when she was very young. The tie we'd gotten Dad for Father's Day two years ago that he never wore. My one-eyed teddy bear, ragged and worn smooth in places. A scattered rainbow of Grandmother's pills. Scrabble letters, spelling only nonsense. I followed our lost things down the stairs and to the parlor, where the night people were dancing. The turntable scratched out one of those blues songs they loved. They clung tight to each other, a bundle of shadows. The knot of them swayed to the music; their feet hardly made any sound. Orange embers flickered on the end of their lips as they smoked. I pushed through the crowd of them, picked up a friendship bracelet from camp. One or two of the night people looked down at me and smiled their sharp smiles, but most of them only danced, their faces tucked in the crooks of each other's necks, as if they were dreaming. They smelled like the harbor, like green water and diesel and garbage and I pulled my shirt over my mouth and nose and pushed through them, not wanting to get caught in the middle of it this time.

My postcards from camp lay scattered across the kitchen table. And there, by the door—the smooth stone I had taken from the lake.

The basement had always frightened me, with its old-fashioned boiler like a squat fat man and the rows of metal shelves filled with Grandmother's forgotten things—a whole rack of ratty fur coats and my grandfather's service pistol and tins of cast iron

soldiers and a taxidermied sugar glider. Cobwebs hung from every corner of the room like rotting lace. Somewhere off in the dark, I heard water dripping from the pipe, slow and steady as a metronome. Then there were voices and I followed them down the long rows of shelving and there was a cluster of night people gathered around the boiler, as if for warmth. They smiled at me as I approached; I smiled back. It was okay, even, to be in the basement if they were there. The night girl stood in the middle of the crowd.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

The night people murmured and shifted and looked at the night girl, even though at that moment she looked very young, barely older than me. She hesitated and then she said, “We want you to stay.”

“To stay?”

“With us,” she said. “It isn’t hard. We hide during the day. In the walls, sometimes. All you would have to do is come with us. You could be one of us. You don’t have to go with them. We heard—we heard them say they’re leaving. They’ll take you with them, Alice.”

There’d be no end to it, no end to breakfast at midnight and moonlight swims and running in the house and all the other things we weren’t supposed to do. I could grow up a night person and the night girl could tell me stories and there would be no more arguing, only the low, sad laughter of night people, the sound of lullabies. And briefly I dreamed it, dreamed my skin going blue and gray like theirs, dreamed my eyes going pale, dreamed I was a faded, tucked away thing, hidden in the walls. Then my hands closed around the gold earring my mother had given me when I got my ears pierced,

when she had leaned down and told me, “Well, you’re almost a woman now, aren’t you,” and the metal bit into my skin. And there were other memories; I was holding them in my arms, the things we’d lost, the things the night people had taken during the summer, not anything we especially needed, but full of memories. The lake at camp, water splashing, my friends shrieking, the sun bright on all of us. Dad letting me sit on his back and pretend he was a grizzly bear. Playing Scrabble with Grandmother.

And I thought then of the world without sunshine, without my mother’s footsteps on the stairs in the morning and my father’s deep soft voice and without even my Grandmother calling the right answers to the television and I thought of going away into the night without them, without the chance of moving back across the city, without names, even fake names like Alice, without stories with happy endings and meals after breakfast and songs sung happy and not full of heartbreak—and the dream ended. I looked up at the night people then, their faces, sad, empty shadows, full of nothing but the quiet creaks of a house late at night, nothing but the dust in the places no one bothers to clean, nothing but the sense of someone lingering quietly in a dark room. I put the gold earring in the night girl’s hand and folded her fingers over it and I said, “It’s a gift, now. You didn’t need to steal it. I’ll have the other one and I’ll—remember.”

They parted around me, let me walk away. When I looked back they were already fading. Their big eyes glowed at me in the dark, but grew paler, fainter, until I saw nothing, just the memory of light, just the impression of shadows in the murky basement, and the night girl was the last to go and I thought maybe she smiled at me before she went. I climbed back up the dark stairs, slow, one by one, and into my grandmother’s

little yellow kitchen. I turned off the stove and the coffee machine. I took up the dishes and put them in the sink, filled it with hot water and soap. Then I went into the living room, which was empty, the furniture still out of order, the windows still open, the record player still spinning out that same sad song, a song I would never forget. And by then I knew the words and I sang along, my voice low and rough: “I mean I’ll see you, after I cross the deep blue sea.”

THE GIRL IN THE DEER

Constance took Jeremy Rocklin for one last Sunday walk before she went back to college after her semester away. It was mid-January but warm, and they followed their usual route behind the elementary school, at ten AM when everyone was still sleeping off the weekend or in church.

The school, which they'd both attended, sat on top of the hill, a crooked 'L' of two wings; the county had added one long hallway during the nineties housing boom. Constance remembered the smell of concrete and sawdust, the crisscrossing bands of yellow tape warning the kids away, the way the newer wing sat three inches higher than the old wing—they covered the gap with a metal band where the two sides joined. She and Jeremy never went in, never roamed the halls feeling too big for the space like giants in some lost land of Lilliputians. Once the two of them had gone up to a window, leaned against the narrow pane of frosted glass and looked in at the construction paper projects tacked to the walls, the green chalkboards, the small flimsy desks where they'd once sat so obediently with the others. They'd been students there at different times, almost six years between them, but it was the same, the same as always since the place had opened in the seventies.

They walked the grounds, down the brown hill toward the inky fringe of trees that circled the grounds. The playground sat tilted along the slope, as if the swings and jungle gyms were slowly sliding to the bottom. Sometimes Constance crossed the wooden

balance beams or Jeremy jogged through the tire track, but that last day they passed the playground without speaking and went into the forest. It wasn't much of a forest, really—just a few acres of spindly pines bordered by the elementary school and Cloverly Place, an abandoned housing development. It was quiet out in the trees, but if they stood still and listened, they could hear cars on the highway that coiled serpentine around the neighborhood.

They followed the impression of the school's old nature trail, the places where the ground was flattest, even though everything was carpeted in pine needles and layers of trash that washed down the hill when it rained—gum wrappers, fast food bags, Coke cans, old newspapers. The debris crunched under their shoes, mixed in with the leaves. When Constance looked down, she saw a glossy page of coupons from the local paper. The ink had run since the last rain, blurred the text, but she could make out waxy bright fruit, bloody red steaks, the pale pastel cleaning products that would make everything pristine. She kicked at the paper; dirt from her shoe sprayed it. She was sweating inside her wool coat. She undid the buttons, let the two sides flap open like a pair of wings. Stuffed her gloves in her pocket.

Jeremy kept pace ahead of her, his shoulders slumped forward, hands in his sweatshirt. Sixteen now, he'd grown into a pale, pimply teenager. Not heavy, but soft looking, as if his bones were not quite solid. Sullen, sometimes mute. Little remained of the dorky-smart eight-year-old she used to babysit. The one who won science fairs and made kites out of paper and took apart electronics just to see how they worked. Of late, she'd gotten him to talk a little, to say how school was, how the teachers bored him, how

he skipped with his friends and went and smoked pot outside the closed-down strip mall, how it was all fucked because adults just didn't understand, kept saying the usual bullshit. Wait until you're older, they said. It just takes time, they said. It seemed, he told her one Sunday, like time was all there was, stretching out gray and infinite in front of him, nothing ever changing. She hadn't told him that she wished that were true, that time was long, that she had more of it between her and going back to school. But that didn't matter; it was the last Sunday and Jeremy hadn't spoken yet that morning, his posture warning her away. You have to try anyway, she reasoned. It's the last time, it matters that you try.

So she said, "Holy shit." Trying to get a rise out of him. He liked that about the walks, she knew, being able to say whatever he wanted around her, and their conversations had been peppered with the worst language she could conjure. "Fuck global warming, right?"

A week ago, he would have explained patiently that daily, local weather patterns are not, in fact, indicators of global changes, or—if he was feeling Marxist—he'd get into how the capitalist machine was destroying the planet, fuck the man, etc., but now he just muttered, "Right. Yeah. Fuck global warming." She felt him pull away; his pace increased and he kicked up little waves of dry, brown needles and trash. A soda can bounced off his foot and skittered into the underbrush. She watched him, a small hunched figure, and saw her failure in the set of his shoulders, the dipped posture of his neck. She hadn't helped at all.

“You were his favorite babysitter.” His mother had pleaded with her months ago at the Fresh Mart. The two of them stood mostly hidden behind a pyramid of cantaloupes. He’s having a bad time, Mrs. Rocklin said. Bad time, parent code for trips to the guidance counselor and the psychologist and the psychiatrist for a new prescription every month. Black eyes and split lips and other kids’ homework and ever-sinking grades. But just “a bad time,” Mrs. Rocklin had told Constance, like Jeremy wasn’t having fun at summer camp or couldn’t pass his permit test. Then she’d added, “I think he could use someone to talk to. He won’t talk to me. And he always liked you. It would be a huge favor, Constance. I could pay you.”

What she didn’t say, what Constance knew she was thinking, what everyone in the neighborhood thought now when they saw her: And we all know you have nothing to do since you came home in October, a leave of absence with less than a year to go and no one knows why you couldn’t just finish, would it have been so hard, your poor father, what will you do now, what can you do now, in this economy, too. There had been times when she wanted to shout back at them, tell them that they didn’t understand, it wasn’t that simple, that it was too much to go back, even now, even after three months, she felt as raw as she did the day she left and the idea of going back, even thinking about it, made her feel cold. Sick.

“I’ll think about it,” Constance had said, but she knew she would do it, that she *did* need something to do, even before she called Mrs. Rocklin the next day and asked when would be a good time for her to talk to Jeremy and explained that money wasn’t necessary—even though it would have been nice, money. So it had become Sunday

mornings, because Jeremy wouldn't go to church and Constance hadn't bothered in years either and it was the only time everything was quiet or mostly quiet.

The sound of sirens reached them from out on the highway. Constance shivered, sweat cool on her skin. Jeremy had disappeared into the trees where the trail wound around, the foliage thicker, denser, toward the middle of the plot. And beyond that: Cloverly Place, which had once been more trees and then was a series of foundations dug in red Virginia clay and was now nothing, just a few skeletal frames, a few concrete-filled basements, the untouched foundations green and overgrown. They'd climbed the fence a few times, wandered around the empty, half-finished lots. Jeremy liked it there. He'd go that way.

She walked after him. There was a part of her that wanted to respect his privacy, to say parents don't know everything. From the beginning, she'd wanted to just leave him alone, to walk without speaking like he seemed to prefer, to tell his mother he was fine, that she didn't have anything to worry about, it was just the normal teenager stuff. There *were* the nicotine stains on his fingers and the rumors, the stories he'd only hinted at, of course, but she could hear them in what he didn't say. Being shoved into lockers and tripped off the bus and threatened in the locker room. And there were, of course, the pencil-thin lines going back and forth across his wrists, just a little lighter than his skin, where he'd opened himself—the wrong way—back in August. There was that. And maybe, she had thought, maybe she could help; she could do that at least. So she had tried, for weeks, and sometimes it seemed to work, to be okay, but then there were

mornings like this, and shouldn't the last morning be good, shouldn't it be smiles and hugs and Jeremy cured? Shouldn't it be better?

There he was. By a spindly sapling that had grown right up in the middle of the trail and a small cascade of Styrofoam McDonalds cups. Like he was waiting for her to catch up.

"Jeremy," she said and jogged after him. It wasn't even cold enough to see her breath in the air. The light went kind of orange, all wrong for winter. The ground soft, wet, too warm for snow, and there was mud on her shoes and Jeremy's, splattered on their jeans. That awful Potomac goo. When he was twelve and she was eighteen, they'd done one of those Adopt-A-Stream programs with the community center, except the stream was mostly black gunk and thick, sucking mud and they spent most of the day pulling old tires out of it and falling over each other and by the time they finished, they were both covered. It wasn't long after that Mrs. Rocklin decided Jeremy was old enough to be on his own when she went out in the evenings. Then Constance had gone off to school and forgotten him, forgotten sitting in the Rocklins' kitchen helping him with his homework and doing her own, forgotten his preoccupation with gory B-movies—even though they gave him nightmares—and his peanut allergy and everything else Jeremy. How easily it had all gone, not four years past.

"Jeremy," she called again, and she wanted to say, Remember Adopt-A-Stream? But he turned away when he saw her coming, his face tilted toward the ground.

"Jeremy?" She reached out to snag his elbow.

“What,” he said and it wasn’t a question—instead the hard snap of a word between them like tree branches under ice.

Except there is no ice, Constance thought, and tugged at her damp collar. She frowned at him. “What?” she repeated. “What’s going on with you? I thought we were cool.” He looked at her and then away again, quiet. It was like that first Sunday, the one back in November when he’d been suspicious and angry—he was sixteen, he didn’t need a fucking *babysitter* he said, spat the word at her, although it’d been four years since she looked after him. And you, Constance thought, ashamed, you said all the wrong things, said shit like, “You can talk to me, you know,” and “I understand what you’re going through,” and “It gets better, it really does. It just takes time. You’ll love college.” Before she’d left Tech, she’d been a psych major, she told him. Used words like adolescent agoraphobia and possible selves and cognitive development. He told her to go fuck herself.

Jeremy leaned on the sapling, rested his forehead against the bark. The tree was already heavy with snarled creepers; the slender trunk bowed towards the ground. He mumbled something into the dead vines—she thought maybe he was counting—and then he asked, louder, “Why did you leave school?”

“I told you,” she said. She had, the second week, given him the same speech she had given everyone, her father included. She had felt lost, out of place, she needed some time to figure things out. For Jeremy, she’d thrown in the parts he would like. Everyone tells you to go to school and that’s all you need to do, that you just go and pick a career and then you’re an adult. But it’s bullshit. You just go on doing what you think you’re

supposed to do until you realize that you don't know what you're doing, no one knows. She just couldn't fake it anymore, she told him, told them all. She just needed some time. And it was true, everything she told them, it just wasn't *all*. She had needed time and she'd had it and now it was time to go back, even though the thought still made her nauseous, as if no time at all had passed.

"I'm not dumb, Constance," Jeremy said and his voice was milder than usual. He pulled away from the tree, took a step toward her. His acne stood out red on his face, two dozen angry marks, like he was oozing it. "Come on, you're going back. If you really felt that way, if that's all it was, you'd like, go backpack in Europe with everyone else your age." Another step.

She wanted to put more space between them, between her and Jeremy's terrible bloodless face, but that would be giving ground. All her clinical teachers told her to be firm. Define your boundaries, but do not give them power over you. "Jeremy, I really don't think this is—"

"Fuck, Constance, if you say 'appropriate' after you snuck an eight-year-old into *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, I'm out of here, okay?" He hadn't slept for a week after that movie, made her check under the bed for more than a month. She remembered how fragile he looked then, at eight, like something you might take home from the store wrapped in tissue paper. Sometimes, his mother would come home late and Constance would sit up with him, like he was her brother, that delicate little kid, his covers drawn up to his nose. But this Jeremy, this brittle angry boy, she couldn't think of anything that would scare him—that made her feel the loss of him all the more.

But he wanted the truth and it was the truth that had been pressing on her, from this side of October, and it had seemed like a lot then, taking the semester off, but nothing had changed, she was no stronger for the time away, and wouldn't it help, maybe, to tell someone, anyone, even Jeremy Rocklin? So she found herself saying, "There was this party." And Jeremy, smart kid that he was, even now, looked up. He was paying attention. She turned away from him. "Sigma Beta Phi—it's a fraternity." The nicest frat house, a big-screen TV in the common area, everyone with their own bedroom, a real stereo and the music had been so loud and you'd taken a drink from the line of red plastic Solo cups. "I don't really remember what happened. I just think—maybe—you know." It had been all light and noise after that and you'd woken up, head throbbing, in a empty bed, an empty room, and you felt, felt what happened, you knew, even though you told yourself it didn't happen. But you didn't remember, didn't know, where were your pants, your bra. You made the appointments, took that STD pamphlet the RA offered you and her sympathy had been repulsive, and she'd used words like "rape kit" and "crisis center," and you'd said, no, you were sure you'd made a mistake, nothing had happened, maybe you just needed a break, senior year being so stressful and all. "I was scared," Constance said finally.

She stopped then. She felt like she did after a long illness, like she'd completely emptied her stomach, and her throat burned and her insides went light, hollow feeling, as if there was only air there now, nothing inside her, nothing to hold her up, and she felt punctured, ripped open, exposed. She shifted to apologize for going on like that. But then Jeremy was there, standing very close to her and much taller, she'd never realized before

this how much taller than her he was, because he was still eight years old when she looked at him—still fragile—and he looked that way now, and she started to ask him what was wrong, had she upset him, she was sorry, she was just being stupid and he shouldn't pay attention.

Then he kissed her.

It was the worst kiss she'd had in a long time, in years, since high school. His nose mashed into her cheek. She could feel the bumpy line of acne and stubble on his skin. He didn't know what to do with his hands and ended up getting one caught in her hair; the other clenched her shoulder. And she smelled him, the sweatshirt that never got washed, the stale sweat on his skin, the grease in his hair, the sewer-reek of old weed. Her eyes were open and she could see, up close, that he'd squeezed his shut and his brows were furrowed tight, too, like maybe he was in pain. It lasted about six seconds, her standing there and thinking, numbly, as if she wasn't there at all, so this is how Jeremy Rocklin kisses. I never wanted to know. She pulled away when she felt the first slug-like prod of tongue. "Stop," she said.

"Constance," he said. Breathing hard from his mouth. "I'm here for you. You know I always—"

"I said stop it, Jeremy. What's wrong with you?"

He didn't say anything—he was still too close, far too close, and his proximity made her angry. How could he? She shoved him.

He stumbled backward in the pine needles and detritus. He put his clumsy hands into his jacket pockets. His face twisted. "You were the first girl I jerked off thinking

about,” he told her. It sounded more like an insult than a confession; he sneered as he said it.

She folded her arms across her chest. “You’re sixteen,” she said.

He made a wet, disgusted noise and went off down the path, rounded a corner and disappeared, and even though the pine needles deadened his footsteps, they sounded loud, accusatory. He ran. She cursed. You were supposed to look after him, to bring him home—it was the last walk, couldn’t you even manage one last walk? Shit, goddammit, shit. She chased him. The two of them kicked up trash and leaves.

“Jeremy, *wait*,” she said. He was getting away from her; his longer legs outpaced hers. They came up on Cloverly, the wall of holey orange plastic fencing. Jeremy hit it at a run and jumped up, the whole of it shaking with his weight, and he scrambled up it and over the top, finding easy handholds in the mesh, and then he went down the other side. She reached the base of it, saw him hurry away from her.

For a moment she considered not following. She could just let him go, accept that she had failed, finally, let him vanish into the dead development. Could just walk back the way they’d come, back out to the school, take the far sidewalk home to the little brick house where her father had lived some twenty-two years now with its neat-trimmed lawn and her old bike parked under the eaves. The high arc of the bypass in background, the concrete that wound up into the gray sky. At night she could see the stream of headlights moving up in the dark, brighter and closer than the stars. She could go back and find her father at home, reading the Sunday paper, and she could look at the course catalogue, pick out the classes for the spring, return the phone calls and the emails asking her how

she was doing, saying how everyone missed her, how they were glad she'd be back. She could leave Jeremy Rocklin to Cloverly—and maybe she hadn't saved him, but she had tried and that counted, didn't it?—and go back and everything would be normal, it would. It had to be.

But then she heard, “Constance,” from over the fence, somewhere down in the overgrown grass. “Constance.”

She grabbed a handhold and started climbing, too, even though the plastic bit into her hands and she slipped twice, once going up and then again on the other side when she swung her leg over the top. For a moment, she was suspended above Cloverly, the only time the place looked like it might have been something, a real neighborhood, forty houses on quarter-acre lots, a long horseshoe of road with a bunch of little cul-de-sacs branching off like estuaries. All of it bordered with orange now. And there, off to the side, was Jeremy, and something else, something beyond him, large and brown and unmoving sprawled on the ground. She scrambled down the other side of the fence, stumbled, almost fell, and then she went after him, sliding in the dead grass. She couldn't see him now and headed where she thought he had been, but an abandoned dumpster blocked her line of sight. “Jeremy?”

“Over here.” She tried to follow his voice.

She came around the dumpster, green and rusting, and—

It was a doe, not dead long, too fresh to stink. Not bloated and contorted like the deer Constance often saw on the side of the road, vultures clustered over them like black flies. It lay on its side, as if it had fallen over, gentle, its legs crooked in front of it, its

eyes open and staring and sky-colored. Maybe it had been hit by a car, lived long enough to run away, and died in the development, bleeding to death from the inside, a quiet burning kind of death. Or it had been shot by some hunter who trespassed on the weekends, a holdover from the time before the bypass and Cloverly, when the forest was a forest and deer wandered into people's yards. Terrible deaths, but normal ones. She almost believed it. Except, except for the wound in the animal's side, at least two feet across, red and deep and slick looking, all exposed flesh, white ridges of bone showing through where the ribs bracketed the abdomen. Still-wet blood stained and matted its fur. Displaced organs dotted the ground around it, all muddled and soft and loose, the grass under them almost black. The deer stared at her, those pale blue marble eyes blank and unknowing. She took a step backward and another step. But it's no different than dissection class—the cats, remember the cats. But there wasn't the smell of formaldehyde, no plastic gloves, no goggles, no lab coat, no professor saying, "Make the incision." She heard retching.

Jeremy was bent over, his hands braced on his thighs, a puddle of vomit at his feet. She went over to him, put a hand on his shoulder, not too much pressure, ready to pull away if he reacted badly, and he straightened. He wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his hoodie, nodded when she asked if he was okay. "We should go," she said. She looked at her watch. Her hand shook, but she ignored it. Stupid to get worked up over roadkill. You know better, even if Jeremy doesn't. "It's almost eleven and your mom will want you home for lunch." She didn't take his hand, instead snagged the cuff of his hoodie, tried to pull him away. But he went back to the deer, bent over it, passed his knuckles

across his mouth. For a moment, she thought he might be sick again and she opened her mouth to insist, “Seriously, Jeremy, just leave it alone.”

But then he said, “There was a girl.”

“What?”

He dragged the back of his sleeve over his mouth and looked at her; his eyes were very bright. “In—in its stomach,” he said. “I saw her. She ripped her way out. Constance, she was all bloody and messed up. Man.” He wiped at his mouth again. “Goddammit. Fuck.”

“Jeremy, stop—” She looked at him. The puddle of vomit. “Are you saying there’s some little kid lost in here? Where did she go? Was she hurt?” She wheeled around, looking. Thought maybe she saw a flash of movement down by one of the lots. Red in the brown grass, like a flag. She started in that direction. Jeremy grabbed at her; his hand closed around her wrist. Constance struggled against his grip, tried to pull away.

“You can’t, no. Don’t,” he said. “She isn’t *lost*, Constance. I saw her. I saw her come out of the deer. Where it’s ripped open, you see? She came right out there, Constance, she chewed her way out, I saw her do it. She was covered in blood.”

She glared at him. “You’ve been watching too many movies,” she said. Shook him off, put both hands on her hips. “Now did you really see a little girl? Maybe you got confused, maybe she was touching the deer and got some, some of the blood on her. You can see things wrong sometimes, you know, when you’re—”

“I’m not high.” His voice was quiet, patient, more so than she’d ever heard it.

“But I don’t think we should be here. It feels.” He looked down at the deer again, rubbed

his shoulder, looked out toward the highway. “It feels wrong here. You were right, we should just leave. It’s time to go anyway.” He started to walk away then, but she didn’t move. The deer, its staring eyes, its hooves lying neatly, all the blood. So quiet—it seemed strange somehow that it had died in pain, but there it was, ripped open and gaping. Jeremy called back to her. “Really, maybe you’re right. Maybe I didn’t see anything at all. In fact, I know I didn’t. It was nothing, don’t even worry about it. I’m just being dumb. Will you come on now, please?” But she wasn’t listening to him, barely registered the panicked way he was talking, too fast and high, babbling.

Instead, she was looking down, down in the red-splattered dirt around the deer, the places where its soft parts had spilled onto the ground, and there, next to the flesh, she could see a tiny, perfect footprint captured in the wet earth. And there—another one. Blood in the grass. Yes, someone else had been here, someone small and alone, not the creature Jeremy was describing, all pointed teeth and fingernails full of tissue and blood, black-eyed and clawing. Someone lost, Constance thought. Fragile. She ran.

Jeremy called her name, but she didn’t stop. There had been movement. There had been a patch of white disappearing over the side of an embankment, into one of the holes they’d dug for a foundation, back when these were supposed to be houses. Basements and living room sofas and light coming through the kitchen windows and neatly made beds. She imagined them superimposed over the trenches the construction workers had dug with their big-toothed machines before the money ran out. Forty houses, all neat and lined up with small green lawns and there was a girl lost where she should have been playing out in the grass. Constance ran and Jeremy was running after her; she

heard him cursing. Little Jeremy Rocklin. She'd looked under his bed for monsters, sometimes thinking, what if, what if there is something looking back at me in the dark, something with big shining eyes and long sharp teeth?

They went skidding down into one of those overgrown holes, and her foot tangled in the undergrowth of dead grass and she fell down into the pit of it and the air oofed out of her lungs in a rush. She lay at the bottom of what should have been a house, where a house had begun and ended, all of it over in a month. There were FOR SALE signs everywhere in the neighborhoods now, but most especially around Cloverly, land for development. But this wasn't a house and might never be one, might only be the impression of one. Constance lay there and looked up at the gray sky above them, a winter sky, but it was too warm, too warm for winter coats and gloves, too warm for the trees to drop their leaves. It hadn't snowed in years. Behind her, Jeremy skidded down the steep edge of the hole. "Constance? Are you okay?"

He came over to help her and when she took his hands to pull herself upright, she saw the scars on his wrists. What a stupid kid to do that to himself, she thought, always too fast and too much—and those scars would always be there for everyone to see. Better to keep them inside, out of sight. She dropped his hands before he could see her looking. He watched her, wary, and he really was so much taller than she was. She wanted to say something, to apologize for earlier, for telling him what she never should have told anyone, and she understood, maybe, why he had wanted to kiss her, but there were better girls for him to kiss, and that she knew, even if no one else did, that he would be okay.

But then there was another flash, another glimpse of movement at the top of the slope. Then the shape, whatever it was, disappeared in the overgrown weeds and over the side.

“Jeremy,” she said and grabbed his hand, pulling him along with her. They scrambled up the side of the hole, the sides already caving in, nothing to keep them upright. Jeremy’s hand was slick in hers, but she tightened her grip on it and they went up, out of the hole and onto the packed dirt road that was once supposed to be Cloverly Street.

“Where is she?”

“Constance,” he said again. “I saw her. I did. We should—we should leave her alone, okay? Trust me. Let’s just leave her alone.”

“I want to see her,” she said. “See if she’s okay. Was she okay?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know.”

The sky sat low over the abandoned development, thick clouds despite the warm weather, and the sun showed through weak and sallow. But even a blue sky couldn’t help Cloverly. She stood with Jeremy in the middle of it, their hands still loosely clasped, the two of them looking over the dead grass and the square edges of abandoned foundations.

Just beyond them, out toward the plastic fence, she saw her: a little girl, no more than five or six, naked, disheveled, and dirty. She looked back for a moment and Constance thought then, me, she’s looking at me, and the two of them stood there, and their eyes met across the distance, the girl’s black eyes deep and staring and unflinching. She didn’t blink, only watched Constance calmly—the way an animal does at night when it has forgotten how to be afraid of people. Once Constance would have wanted to look

away, to avert her eyes from this girl, this creature, but she didn't, she couldn't, she had to see. The girl's teeth and nails darkened full of flesh, the deer's flesh, her hair matted and clotted with blood, her knees grass-stained and scabby. This one, Constance was sure, this one would do anything. Yes, the girl was something different—a hard, angry thing crawled from somewhere warm and quiet. She'd ripped free, chewed her way out, but what was there now that she had? Only Cloverly.

Then the girl turned away from them and she climbed the orange plastic fencing and up over the side, out of sight. She could get out, escape the vacant expanse that would have been a neighborhood, would have been Cloverly. She could climb the fence and down the other side and be out in the world, not safe but still there, raw and bloody and brand new.

FOR NEED OF LEAVENING

One Monday morning, the Monday before I first conceived of the girl, my nail came off in the biscuit dough and three drops of blood fell onto the countertop.

They stared at me for a moment, those three precise red dots on the flour-dusty counter. Death. The easiest omen to read. Then the pain came and more blood. I wound a kitchen rag around the hand—the cloth went red quick—and cursed. The loud ugly sound snapped off my tiled kitchen walls. Like a trapped cat. Jesse heard my yowling and came into the kitchen from outside, sweating and oil-smeared from working on the truck. He took in me and the soaked rag around my hand and hurried over. No doubt my boy thought I had, at long last, after some seventy years of baking and cooking, chopped off a finger. And us eighteen miles from town, over a hundred from the nearest hospital. The older I got, the more that distance terrified him, I knew. “Mom, what’s the matter?”

“It’s an omen,” I told him, pointing at the blood on the counter, my nail in the dough. “A bad one, Jesse. Blood.”

“Did it come off?” he asked of the nail. Ignoring my diagnosis. He squinted at the three ruddy drops going brown in the white powder. His brows pulled close over his nose. He rubbed a hand across his lips. He knew what it meant—I had taught him how to read signs long before he went to school—but he didn’t want to see it. Hadn’t wanted to see such things for a while, over a decade now since adolescent skepticism first set in.

His father had been that way, too. Determined to be blind and dumb and happy.
“Just like that? You didn’t bend it or anything?”

I huffed at him. “Of course not. What’s a little biscuit dough going to do?”

He grabbed my injured hand above the wrist. Turned it one way and another, as if he could divine how it had failed me. “You get a medical degree while I wasn’t looking?” I snapped, pulling out of his gentle grasp.

He looked hurt. “Better clean it up,” he said. “I’ll go get you a bandage.” As if it were something we could cover and forget—swipe flour over the three perfect circles of my blood. Three moons. Three months. I hadn’t seen a sign so clean and clear in years.

Still, I went over to the tap, obedient, and ran cold water over the exposed finger; the soft spongy material of my nail bed prickled. Jesse came back with a fleshy-colored bandage and drew it tight over the wound. “You’ll be cooking tonight then, I suppose,” he said. His euphemism, not mine. He turned the injured hand over; he looked at it like he might discern something from the wrinkled, weathered skin of my palms, more calloused than his own. Then he kissed the edge of the bandaid the way I’d done for him when he was a boy. An apology.

“And you’ll be going out with the Donahue boys.”

“Better to stay out of your way, isn’t it?” There was an edge there that he hadn’t had as a boy. Years ago, he would have sat on the extra kitchen stool and watched me pinch dashes of daffodil petals and ginger root into a draught to keep shades away. But the garage got him and then the Donahue boys and *her*, of course. She’d never set foot in my house, not once in the past two years, but she invaded in other ways: the sour, fake-

flower smell of her perfume, the lipstick she left on his clothes, her voice dry and soft on the other end of the phone, like a snake shedding its skin on the rocks. I wouldn't say her name, although we both knew she would be there, too. Not a Donahue in surname, but a cousin and Donahue enough, the whole family a lingering miasma over the county.

Jesse didn't correct me about who he would be with—we had an unspoken truce on the subject of her. "I won't be too late," he said.

I went back to my biscuits, cut off the bit with my fingernail in it—it poked out of the dough like a crooked eyetooth—and dropped it in the trashcan. Wiped the counter clean. Sprinkled more flour on. Set to folding the dough again, folding and pressing and folding, the steady yield and tug of it worked into my muscles since I was not quite five. Pull, fold, press flat. And again. And then—my mother's ash rolling pin in Jesse's hand. His bright face, smiling. He reached across the countertop to put the rolling pin into my palm. Thumbed a bit of flour off my cheek. "Keep the rest of your nails, please," he said.

If tears wet the flour after he left, there was no one to know it.

They weren't for me—not the tears, not the ceramic crock pot I hurled against the brick wall where it broke into sharp hunks like spearheads, not the thin, soap-tasting potions I drank, and certainly not the girl—not anything that came after was for me. It was for Jesse. Jesse, who at twenty-eight still slept in a narrow bed down the hall from me, the walls of his room papered with Braves pennants and jazz posters like a child's. Jesse, born when my hair was already mostly gray. Jesse, who came to me after his father left for good one April night and put his small arm around my waist and said, "Don't

worry, Mom, we'll be okay." Jesse who had only me, had had only me his whole life, who had come home from school in the afternoons and helped me bake instead of running with the other kids. Jesse, who wouldn't, couldn't leave me, tied up in the house the same way I was. My Jesse. How could I leave him? And what would he do without me, without me to lay herbs on the windowsills to keep bad spirits out, without me to put milk under the back stoop and mistletoe under the eaves?

Three slow drops of blood falling into my flour. Three months. Three.

The cooking, as Jesse called it, always started with something like my nail and the blood, some sort of omen—then I did more than your standard quick and yeast breads, cakes and pies. Not often, not like the baking, the everyday work, the just-bitter sourdough, the lightest biscuits to ever come out of an oven, the muffins spotted with chocolate chips, or latticework piecrusts closed over steaming blackberry guts, or red velvet cupcakes frosted in buttercream, or seven-tiered wedding cakes all curlicued at the edges. Usually it was only baking: flour up to my elbows and slippery egg yolks wiggling in the whites and lemon zest rubbed hard to flakes in small mounds. And the smell of yeast always in my hair and at my pulse points. And those days, I was no different from any other woman in the county, just maybe better in the kitchen.

But sometimes, there were signs. Symbols you could read if you had the means to see them. A crow sat on the mailbox. Two snapping turtles lolled in the yard, soaking up the sunlight. The well water ran red. Or maybe a day laborer in clay-coated overalls came in from the Lerner farm next door, said the chickens had been dying. There was a separate pantry for those days, a close, cool earth-smelling room next to the back door.

My great-grandmother built it, her room, her tricks. Herbs and flowers gathered out in the marsh by moonlight or across the state in the foothills, under fallen boulders, or brought in by the ocean tide to the east after a hurricane. And the people in the county, they knew to come to me with such things, the same way they knew to come for the best beignets this side of the hereafter. They didn't understand the warnings, any of them, but they told them to me and I listened. Mhm, I said. I sent them home with a loaf of bread or a pie or a dozen cookies—and just the right extra ingredients to solve their other problems.

It was rare and wrong to do this other work for myself, and usually it failed. Failed to keep Lawson around, failed to bring us another living child, failed to drive *her* off. But this time, for me, it did not matter. I was old, my hair white now, my hands warped like honeysuckle vines on a sapling, my skin thin, papery, a light, fragile crust keeping me in, keeping me together. But Jesse. Maybe I could make it work for Jesse.

The biscuits went in for thirty minutes and Mrs. Sampson—who once saw a black dog walking down a moonlit path and came to me and had been coming for the baked goods ever since—picked them up, fresh from the oven.

I kept a stack of recipes, thin yellow paper tied with string and hidden behind a loose brick in the kitchen wall. After Mrs. Sampson left, her order already in for next week, I fingered through the cards, studied the handwriting I knew as well as my own, a great-great grandmother or a great-great-great grandmother's handwriting. My bread recipes were in the same hand. The ingredients and the steps were older, of course, much older, older than the house and the kitchen and the sunless pantry where I kept the

carefully labeled bottles and jars and small, folded paper packets full of bitter-smelling things. I had inherited all of it.

There was that, too. I had no daughter to give them to—only Jesse, who didn't want it.

I looked out in the backyard, my gardens thick with bees and buds, the slouching hang of the willow trees, the live oak's wide-splayed arms grabbing for whatever they could touch. And that wet summer smell lingered over everything, that mulch and half-dead flowers and soft-sinking ground reek of July. Three months. September, when it was not yet cold, and storms tumbled down from the north, got snagged on the mountains. The air would go drier, cooler, and some of the plants would die, curl up and blow away, though the hardier ones would hang on, and I'd cut them back so that they could reemerge full and flush and green in the spring. I'd have time to do that, I decided, to cut the crepe myrtles back for winter. Then I went inside to think about the girl.

She would have to be special; no townswoman or farmer's daughter would do, certainly not a Donahue, all of them small, spiteful creatures, little better than crows. Not for Jesse and not for what I needed to teach her.

That night, I hauled up two ten-pound sacks of white wheat flour from the cellar. All-purpose sufficed—what makes a recipe special isn't the base, it's the other stuff, the honey and the molasses, a bite of chili pepper in a flourless chocolate cake, or sea salt sprinkled over Irish soda bread. The things that come in amounts so tiny and precise that they may not seem important at all. I brought up a couple of barrels, too, back from when

my daddy used to make blackberry wine. No bowl in my kitchen, well stocked though it was, would be enough to hold her. I was heaving and panting by the time I was done. Once it would have been easy. Chores kept me tough as a girl; life kept me tough later. But it didn't matter. I leaned on my kitchen stool and panted and felt how thin my lungs had become.

Jesse came home around one o'clock, smoke-eyed and reeking and pale, something vital drained from him by the nighttime, by the crossroads bar and her. He leaned in the doorway looking at me, and a moment passed before I noticed him. He tilted his head to the side, took in the barrels and the bags of flour. He'd seen stranger in that kitchen and he had no reason to wonder at it, but I could see the suspicion in his face and maybe anger. Somewhere he had stopped trusting me. I didn't wonder at the cause—I knew well what they said about me in town. I knew she dribbled the rumors in his ear. Donahue poison, all of it. They'd wanted to take him away from me years ago, when Lawson left. Said he couldn't be mine, that I had been too old to bear children. Look, they said, how the other one died, twisted and too early.

“What's all this?” Jesse asked.

“Big order came in after you left,” I explained.

“And your hand—?” He inclined his head toward the counter, now spotless, even the memory of my blood scrubbed from its surface with hot water and a little lemon juice. Flour and blood dissolved in the liquid.

“Nothing to worry about. How are the Donahue boys?”

“Mom.” He warned me off. You don't want to talk about this, his tone said.

“I just wanted to know if you had a good night, honey.”

“It was fine. Okay? Fine.”

“Okay.” I went over and took his face between my hands—stubble rough on my palms, that false-flowery stink of her in my nose—and tilted his forehead close for a kiss. “Get some sleep,” I said.

I stood and listened to his tread on the stairs and down the hallway. He went into the bathroom; the water shushed through the pipes. The runner over the hardwood floor muffled his footsteps. His door moved on its hinges. And quiet.

I slipped out the back, drew the storm door closed behind me. No need to lock anything out here. No one around for miles.

It would take some time, I knew, to assemble the ingredients. The heather must be selected due south of an infant’s grave. Wild lavender from a field lying fallow for three seasons. The rosemary from the garden of a virtuous woman. Also, fresh straw for her bones—soaked in a brew of honeysuckle nectar, hen’s blood, and deer’s milk. Two weeks in the making, that brew, at a constant simmer. And a whole month for the girl to rise once I’d combined the ingredients, a month for me to put everything into her, every thought and dream of Jesse, every memory. After, I’d smooth out the limbs, the shadows of her face. And then I’d spit once on each eyelid, whisper the word of life in her ear, and with this last, she’d be awake.

I knelt in the long grasses that grow in old cemeteries. The ground was uneven under me, pitted, the grave sunken in under the overgrowth. A simple stone in front of

me: Baby Walker. The engraved letters blurred; in another decade or so, they would be indecipherable. I ran my palm over the smooth edge of the headstone, pressed my fingers to my lips, back to the stone, the ten softening letters that remained of Baby Walker. Boy or girl, I wondered. The one after Jesse had been a girl, they told me, no surprise. I had felt what she was.

When Jesse was small, I took him with me to gather ingredients for the back pantry and I showed him sprigs of devil's mint and wild parsley, explained that one cured backaches while the other caused them if mixed in the flour of the day's first broken bread. Small then—Jesse stayed small for a very long time—and he came home with clay on the knees of his pants and the heels of his palms for years and refused to tell me about it, about how they shoved him in the dirt and called him bastard and sonuvabitch and whorebaby. I could always read it in the set of his jaw and the stiffness of his shoulders. But out in the fields, or helping me in the kitchen, he was a happy child, relaxed and playful and, although you wouldn't know it to look at him now in his greasemonkey get-up, he used to know the recipes for all of my baked goods.

I rose—my knees and hips protested more than usual—and walked twenty paces from Baby Walker's grave out of the cemetery grounds before I came across a flowering rhododendron. Seven petals went into my gathering pouch. The first of many.

I went home that night and lingered at Jesse's door, not pressing my eye to the crack the way some mothers might to make sure he hadn't slipped off in my absence, but just standing, just listening to him breathe, that soft, slow, even breathing of deep sleep. After Lawson left I often did the same thing, stopped and stood at the door and listened

and knew that whatever else was in the world, whoever might mean us harm, my son slept safe in my house.

A week after the drops of blood fell, Jesse came into my kitchen with the Donahue boys. The pot of broth sat on my stovetop, smelling rich and sweet and musty all at once. At the counter, I pummeled a lump of sourdough, the effort of it going all the way to my aching elbows. That morning, I'd brushed loose two big hanks of hair from my scalp and thrown them in the bathroom bin. Tied the rest of it up in a kerchief. It was one of those bright, unfriendly summer days, when the sun looks hard on everything, and you work up a sweat standing in the shade. I had all my fans going in the kitchen, though it didn't help much. Kitchens are hot places by definition and a good cook has a natural tolerance for it.

Jesse came in through the back door with Pete and Billy Donahue, all of them shiny with sweat, the Donahues in nothing more than wife-beaters and shorts, grown men in boys' clothing, the pair of them indistinguishable from each other, both all greasy hair and bad skin and small, mean eyes. Not twins, just wrong in all the same ways. I'd never been able to tell a Donahue apart from another Donahue when they stood next to each other. They grinned. "Hey, Mrs. G," one said. Always Mrs. G with Pete and Billy. Or worse, my given name—Dolores. I gave the sourdough a hard punch.

"What're you boys up to today?" I asked.

"Going down to the old quarry for a swim, Mom," Jesse said. He pecked my cheek.

“With some lovely ladies, Mrs. G,” Pete or Billy said to me. He twitched his hands in the air to suggest a set of curves. “Jesse here’s gotta—”

Jesse glared at him and he went quiet. “Pete’s just bullshitting, Mom. Don’t mind him.”

“You mind your language,” I said. Mild, but I was aching in the humidity. “Here—taste this.” I slipped the lid off the simmering brew and lowered a spoon into the opaque liquid. Jesse opened his mouth. He smacked his lips after it went down and stood, pondering the aftertaste.

“Sgood, Mom,” he told me. “Might add some salt.”

A Donahue reached for the spoon then and I smacked his hand away. “Not for you!”

He laughed. “Well, we better get going. Shouldn’t keep the girls outside in this heat.”

I stopped. “They’re here? The—girls?” I put down the spoon and went to the window, looked out at the truck. Three heads, the sun glaring off the windows—it was impossible to tell which one was her. And although her presence on my property made my skin creep, part of me wanted to see her, to measure her for myself, the lines of her cheeks, the slant of her mouth, whether she had the dark-sunk raisin Donahue eyes. Pete and Billy’s eyes. When I looked back, they were all watching me.

Jesse frowned. “We should get going,” he said. “See you later.” It stung, but I turned back to my dough so he wouldn’t see my face. Then the front door banged and I heard the truck grumble to life and scatter the gravel on the drive. They’d jump into the

old quarry—naked, probably, we did it naked even in my day—spread out dripping on the rocks, laughing, Pete and Billy’s shrill ringing laughs and Jesse’s deeper, smoother one. Hair plastered sleek and sealy to their heads. The girls—or were they women?—lying out tanning, calling taunts. I dipped my hand into a basin of cool water I kept in the kitchen; I’d had a bad fainting spell last August and found it helped.

I thought about it then, I did, running out to the porch and calling Jesse back, calling him back with the announcement, Three months! Less than three now, we’ve lost a week, we’re a week short and we will be another and another week short until September and instead you’ve gone to the quarry with the Donahues who’ve never kept a job more than a day in their lives and her and she will try to take you away from me, but they’re no good, Jesse, no good, no one in that town is any good and they have always hated me—but we’d argued over the Donahues for years now, of course—and it’s just less than three months now, the blood said, and I’m doing all this for you, spending my last three months skulking in graveyards and gardens after midnight and she’ll be perfect for you, Jesse, just wait and see how good she is because she is for you. You won’t need any of them, not Pete or Billy or her. And he wouldn’t need even to say thank you, because mothers never do anything for thank yous, of course, but maybe he could hold my hand and kiss my forehead and tell me that it was okay and I had done the right thing, even if he couldn’t appreciate it, even if he could never say thank you, he would love the thing I made after I was gone, love it, love her.

But I did not speak and the storm door fwapped shut behind them and the truck grumbled to life and Jesse was gone and I wondered if I could smell her perfume coming in under the door.

Three and a half weeks from the day my nail came off in the biscuit dough, I'd filled the two barrels with the ingredients, put two moist tea towels over them, and she was rising. She was dozens of flowers, flour, straw and deer's blood and the sweet taste of honeysuckle, dandelion spores, oak leaves, pine needles, strawberry seeds, ladybug wings, three cups of rainwater and two cups of spring water and one cup of thick green marshwater, powdered acorns, teaspoons of dill and basil from my garden, the feathers of a mother hawk, and yeast, of course yeast, because nothing rises without it. Yeast for life. And so much from all the other ingredients—canniness, wisdom, loyalty, a bit of obedience (not too much), pragmatism, a good head for numbers and measurements, longevity, fertility. Everything, anything she might need, everything that had gotten me through near-eighty years of life.

While she rose, I shriveled; where once there'd been lean tough muscle was loose-hanging chicken skin. My hands tightened up—some days I could loosen them just enough to bake, to knead bread and stir batter. One eye went a little blurry, though it looked okay in the mirror. My hair, once long and thick and curly, was as thin as bird down. I wore hats and bandanas and if Jesse noticed any of it, he didn't say a word. But he wasn't in much, came home from work late, sometimes only to go out again right after. Some nights I never heard him come in at all. But I accepted it—my girl was more

important now, she would get him back in this kitchen, away from her, the Donahue cousin.

At night, I sat next to those barrels, my hand on the ribs of the wood and I talked to the girl. I told her stories of Jesse. Jesse, fifteen months, a bit of a cornhusk in his hand, the bubbling baby noises he made that sometimes came out as words. Jesse, seven, at the seaside, poking a beached jellyfish with a bit of driftwood. Jesse, thirteen, gone over to a neighboring soy bean farm to work a summer, his skin dark from the sun. Jesse coming back from failed stints at college three times. Jesse holding my hand in town. Jesse tucked into bed after a nightmare. Jesse walking home in the twilight, whistling.

“There was a time not long after his father left when he took very ill and he went into a deep fever and I didn’t think that I could pull him out of it. You use licorice root and thyme for that, you know. Boil them to make a tea. Tastes awful, but most of this stuff does. I thought I might lose him those three days. Thought maybe he’d been marked, wouldn’t have put it past any of them in town. They’re dumb but they know the evil eye, never doubt it.

“All the time he was sick, he never called out for his daddy, just for me. He knew that I was there. And when I got sick, too, just after, he did everything for me. He brought me the same tea and water and I had to tell him how to make a poultice of mint and he did it, he did just fine. I was pretty sure, then, that I could just teach him, that I didn’t need another baby, a girl, to pass it all down to. I thought he would want to learn.”

During the day, I put the usual cinnamon rolls and scones and slow-spreading cookies into my oven and I talked to her during this, too. Told her every recipe, explained

every step, every special ingredient. I withheld nothing from her, none of it. I gave it all to her, because she was for Jesse and she would have to know these things to look after him, to live in this house.

“Lawson left because of me. He wanted all this to stop. He thought it was evil, he didn’t like the power it gave me over him or anyone else. And I when I tried to save us, when I made him that tea, I thought he was going to kill me, he was so angry. Then, when Jesse got older, he started in on it, too, saying no one liked it in town, that it was creepy, that it was superstition. He wouldn’t drink any tea I gave him, wouldn’t eat anything he hadn’t watched me make. He didn’t want any part, he said. He stopped baking then, too. He used to make a great sweet potato pie. The trick to that is—”

Then, one mid-August afternoon, Jesse came into the kitchen while I was making a batch of soft pretzels, which boiled in a tall pot on the stove. The smell of them filled the kitchen and I told her that the boiling was important, that the dough had to get wet and puffy and never mind the divots in the flesh of it, it would all smooth out in time—and Jesse, stinking of metal and gasoline, came into the kitchen with the mail, tossed it on the table, and his nametag followed.

“You talking to yourself now?” he asked me.

“Just trying to fill up the quiet,” I said, my voice cool. I took the pretzels out of the pot one by one with a pair of tongs and laid them on towels to dry. In a little bowl nearby, I mixed a powder of salt and seeds to sprinkle over them. Always easier to prepare things like that in advance, I’d told her, just ten minutes before. And said how

when he was twenty-five, the year I got that bad flu, Jesse'd calmed down, started coming back around the kitchen, praising my breads, and the truce began. He wouldn't talk about the other stuff, "the cooking," much, but the mention of it didn't send him into a sulk.

He frowned at me. "Maybe you should be seeing someone, Mom," he said. Someone. The town doctor perhaps. Or any man maybe, someone to distract me from what needed to be done. Hardly. I waved a hand at him. "I'm fine." More pretzels went into the water.

"You don't look fine. You look thin. And—"

The pot lid crashed down. "Don't you dare say old."

He spread his hands, as if to say, Well, I don't have to say it. We both know it's true, don't we? But then—"I'm going out tonight, Mom."

"The Donahue boys?" I thought I did a good job of keeping the suspicion out of my voice, but he still winced. Back to the pretzels, laid out on the towel. Ready to be painted yellow with egg yolks. "Just don't be out too late, huh?"

"No, not Pete and Billy, Mom," Jesse said then. Slow. Careful.

My hands stilled on the counter.

"You remember Maureen? From work? The bookkeeper? She's—"

She didn't knock, she was there and she hadn't knocked, had walked in after him—there the creak of her shoes in my front hall, her crossing my threshold like there was no power to keep her out. And then she came into the kitchen. Teased red frizz of her hair. A black leather jacket. A face I didn't quite remember. Her mother took home a

chocolate cake and a jinx once. And the eyes, those dark olive-pit eyes. She smirked at me.

“Mom, this is—”

“Get out,” I hissed at her.

She cocked at eyebrow at Jesse, who shook his head. She took another step toward me and her hand was out. I flinched away from it. “Hello, you must be Dolores,” she said—that same dead-leaf voice from over the phone—and came closer. I could see myself getting smaller in those shiny beetle-shell black eyes, shriveling up and vanishing and she smiled, her teeth square and white and shining. “I’m Maureen. It’s so nice to meet you.”

Her hand touched mine. The house was so hot; I felt it then, the sticky, close, wet heat of my kitchen filling up the place. First time really in years I felt it. Good for rising dough, the humidity, dough needs humidity. But it was also in my brain, damp and stagnant. I wanted to throw myself over the barrels, then, to protect the dough from this creature, this soul-eating, brain-killing woman, this trespasser. And I didn’t pretend to flutter my eyelids or drop to the ground like some silly girl in a story. No, it was real and I was in Jesse’s arms and he was saying, “Mom—mama—mommy,” like he hadn’t in years and, yes, that felt a little better, it did.

And when I was lying in my dark bedroom later, where he insisted I stay the rest of the night—he sent her, Maureen, home, he stayed in and brought me cool rags and tea—there in the dark of my bedroom, I lay there whispering to my girl, her in the kitchen, and I knew she heard.

*

Limbs. The rise of cheekbones. The arch of her nose. Full, soft lips, fuller than Maureen's, and fuller than mine, now rough and peeling. Lips that were good for smiling, for kissing. Delicate feet. Not so tiny as to be difficult, but small, high-arched, the toes slender. Not big duck-feet like mine. A little crease on her brow, not a frown line but a crease, for concentration, thoughtfulness. I worked on her only in the dark and covered her up during the day, usually long after midnight, after Jesse had gone up to his room. He'd not spoken of Maureen again since my faint, had stopped going out. I heard him on the phone sometimes, not the whispered thrill of new love, but hissed arguments, terse goodbyes. I wondered, sometimes, if Maureen had sent them, those three drops of blood all those weeks ago, if she'd slipped the right root under the porch or scratched out a curse under my bedroom window, but it didn't matter. I was making my girl, and she could succeed where I had failed.

Sometimes during the day, Jesse would come home on his lunch hour and we would sit and eat sandwiches and talk. He told me about his mornings, spent checking inventory and sometimes training a new mechanic or working on a particularly tough job. It was the best we had been in years; his slow drift away from me stalled by my illness that he must see now in my face and skin and teeth, which had begun to loosen.

During one of these lunches when we were laughing over some little thing—some incident with the wrong treads on a shipment of tires—Jesse stopped and looked at me. He had my good thick hair but his father's nose and eyes. Lawson, the prettiest stranger in town, and I'd gotten him not by magic, like everyone said, but with a basket of my

famous cheese biscuits and a smile. All those old sayings about men and their stomachs—they're true. Jesse looked out of those eyes, but they were always kinder, a softness to them that Lawson never could master, not in the seven years I knew him. He would laugh, but there was a brittleness in it, a burnt quality.

Jesse looked at me with those eyes and he said, "Is everything alright, Mom? Are you alright?" It would have been easy to tell him then, to ask him if he'd noticed me slipping out at night, my strange hours in the kitchen, the black half-moons under my eyes, the way my skin had gone jaundiced. Maybe I even could have abandoned the girl then; we were happy enough and time was slight, but we could spend it together. I could have confessed and said, "But I'll stop. We won't need her, if you just promise me you'll look after yourself." I didn't say it. She was almost done, my girl, his girl, and I couldn't put her aside, even for this short happiness.

So, instead I said, "Of course, honey. Everything's fine. Now, do you have time for a slice of rhubarb pie with your old mother?"

That night, I smoothed out her hips, wide. Good for grandchildren.

When she was perfect, I tugged the towels off of her one morning after Jesse had gone to work. I laid her on the kitchen table in the sun coming through the window and the light went over the dips and crests of her, the peaks and valleys, the places shadows would fall when she wearied, the parts that would shift and soften again with age. The sun was warm on my face, too. For the first time in weeks, I did not ache. I sat with her in the morning light, not wanting to leave her as I might leave a tray of pastries in the oven,

and I put my hand on my cheek as I dozed. I dreamed of being a younger woman and seeing Lawson step out of a car in town. I was with my old, wrinkled mother and he didn't look at me, not because I was with my mother, but because there were younger, prettier girls in petal-colored dresses across the street, their straw hats balanced on their heads, their hair neatly pinned. I could see them watching, some of them Donahues, Maureen or her mother standing in the group of them. That red, red hair. But I went up to him anyway and I gave him a cheese biscuit from my basket and he ate it in four quick satisfied bites, but when he looked up at me again, smiling, I saw it was Jesse, not Lawson, and he was smiling and smiling and I was made of soft, fresh dough.

I woke to her moans and the sensation of her thrashing beside me. And at first I thought both my eyes had gone blurry and I rubbed at them. But the rest of the kitchen was clear and when I looked at her again, I knew.

She was petite, as I had made her, and delicately framed, and in her now open eyes—wide, gray eyes—I saw the kind of intelligence I had put in her. But the sounds she made, those low noises, were not words, just vowels. And she opened her mouth in a small 'o' to make them and her brows furrowed and she looked at me with a kind of recognition and it should have made me happy. She knew me, she knew me, she remembered what she'd heard all those long weeks. She knew. I might have celebrated. I might have called Jesse home immediately to see this thing I had made, this masterpiece.

But she was only a thing. She whimpered and groaned at me and flapped her arms and legs and fell off the table finally with a crash, the way she was flailing about, no surprise. And she stayed there crouched on her hands and knees, howling with this new

thing, this new pain and she couldn't express it, didn't know how to say, "Oh, mother, this hurts. What is it, what is it, it hurts. Please make it stop hurting. Please." With everything I'd given her, every flower petal and drop of fresh rain and every whispered word, and she could not say it, could only moan and wail, and she rose clumsily, her limbs tangling, her knees and elbows smacking the hard edges of the kitchen. She fell and rose, fell and rose. Clumsy, so clumsy, and mute and dumb.

Worse—she wasn't beautiful.

By all rights, she should have been. The architecture of her face was fine, the smoothness of her limbs. But there was something off about all of it, and looking into her face, I felt as if I were looking into a mask, blank and inhuman and wrong, quite wrong, this thing that I had made. An emptiness, nothing to fire her features, still somehow soft and half-formed, not cooked through, her face, not complete not—

He came through the front door and straight into the kitchen, calling, "Mom, I forgot—"

And he stood there, looking at us, the creature sprawled on my kitchen floor and me standing over her, not wanting to touch her, what the look on my face must have been, what the look on his face was, his hanging-jaw horrified face, looking at me and the thing I had made for him, the thing I'd toiled all those weeks on. All those weeks wasted, wasted. And Jesse, who had begun to love me again, I thought, who had hunted nightcrawlers with me on a moonless night, who tried to read signs in blood and poplar seeds, who had put his small arm around my waist the night his father and the love of my life abandoned me, abandoned us, Jesse turned around and ran back out the door,

forgetting again whatever he had forgotten that morning, and left us, me and the girl, behind.

She's with me, now, my girl. She tends my aching bones and my slow-melting flesh. Gives me water to rinse the blood from my mouth. Slips ice between my teeth. She's made a brew of willow bark for my joints, which have swollen thick and red and immobile. When she leans over me, I can smell the yeasty perfume of her, the scent I gave her, my girl. She is still soft, her face lineless and raw, but I cannot find her disgusting, do not think to speak the word of death into her ear the next time she comes close, the word that would undo everything that holds her together, that would reduce her to a mound of yeast and herbs. Instead I marvel at the way she moves, a steady, ungraceful walk, like a wound-up toy. The way she tries to talk sometimes, mostly vowels, a baby's garbled cry. She can hum, though, and she does—all the songs I ever hummed to her while she rose; I think she must know my stories, too. She goes back and forth between my room and the kitchen, carries mugs and trays. She brings a paper fan and makes a cool breeze for my face. Every morning she takes the stray hairs from my pillow. Every evening, I ask her, my voice all eggshells, "Jesse?" And she shakes her head. Puts her hand on my brow, dry as flour. She will wait with me, I think, until the end.

FROM HERE TO GEHENNA

They put the town of Bethany in the rearview mirror right away, left before dawn when the sky was still pricked with stars and the moon hung low like a placid drunk—Artie and the guy with no name and the guy with no name's dog. And the rearview mirror was just a figure of speech, because the guy with no name also had no ride, and they walked out of town, the three of them single-file alongside the highway in the dark, just that lazy, dipping moon and the stars for light. The dog—had he called her Pepper?—trotted ahead of them, nails clicking on the macadam, black coat blurring into the road, and Artie just looked at the back of the guy's head and the guitar case slung across his shoulders, not sure what to say.

He was pretty sure he had died, after all, could almost remember it, but not quite, like the last traces of a dream. His motorcycle had spun out of control, sprayed gravel, and he thought he had been somewhere cold and damp for a while, a cave maybe, but there had also been a constant low hum, voices, very soft and very sad but voices all the same. Then the guy came to him out of the dark—him the only bright thing he could see, clearly out of place, a stranger—and he asked him if he wanted to get out of there. And Artie didn't think he had been especially frightened or unhappy in the cave, but he looked into the stranger's eyes. One blue and one brown, dichromatic, the word was. He said, Yes, yes I would like to go. The guy took off his belt then, which had seemed strange; even with the darkness and the low murmur of voices like an underground stream, it was

the belt that seemed strange. He looped one end around his hand and put the other end in Artie's and said: Hold onto this. Only step where I step. And whatever you do, don't look back.

The next thing Artie remembered was Bethany town hall. The mayor and Caleb Abbott who managed the factory just outside of town and Rich Henley, the sheriff. They were shouting, Artie thought, shouting at the guy with the different-colored eyes, but his ears had been ringing, still full of the voices in the cave, and it was only just now beginning to fade. He thought, probably, that he had the first faint throbs of a migraine, too. "What'd you do?" he asked the guy, who slowed a little in front of him. "Why didn't you want to stay in town?"

"Told a few folks some things they didn't want to hear." He shrugged. His voice had no inflection, no accent of any kind, strange in this part of the country. "Folks with guns, you know, and a lot of friends. It's better to leave sometimes. Why? You wanting to go back?"

Artie thought over Bethany, over the four streets, cracked pavement, most of the houses sagging into disrepair, porches laden with junk. "I guess not," he said.

He had worked in the diner—day shift busboy, night shift cashier, minimum wage plus tips. Spent a little time with the kids from town, but he was getting too old for it, for piss-cheap beer and headache pot. He doubted any of them knew his last name. No, Bethany was just another place he'd drifted into; he would have drifted out on his own within another few months. If he had lived. Artie stopped then and fumbled at his arms and ribs and face, searching for injuries. Hadn't there been wounds? Couldn't he hear his

bones crack? The bike had screeched away from him and sparks jumped out from the metal, and he had tumbled into the median. His teeth had splintered, punctured his lips, and there had been, he thought, the strangest sensation of his scalp pulling loose, the evening air on his exposed skull. Artie doubled over and vomited, although there wasn't much to come up, just long strings of bile. He gagged, saliva thick in his throat. The headache was there then, in force, racketing at his temples like it wanted out.

"There it is," the guy said. He walked back to where Artie was crouched, hugging his knees. Whistled for the dog. Put a hand on Artie's shoulder, his touch strangely warm through his shirt. "Always happens sooner or later. You've had a long day, you know. It's hard on the body, going back and forth between life and death, death and life. Your insides get all scrambled. You'll be okay, though. We'll just take a second."

"I really died?" Artie asked him.

The guy shrugged. "You're fine now."

Artie didn't know if he said anything else. He was falling back into the dark.

He dreamed of the sound of water dripping onto stone and pale faces in the dark and there had been hands reaching for him, too, dragging him under and he didn't struggle at all. He sank beneath the surface of an underground lake and stayed, suspended, not worried about breathing or not breathing and there were the voices again, a low hum like bees in a hive, so many of them and they should have been jumbled, unintelligible, but he could make out what they were saying—they were saying, "Go."

When he woke, the sun shone clear and bright down on him, the sky very blue. The guy sat next to him, the black guitar case on his other side, and watched him through those odd mismatched eyes. The floor vibrated against his spine. Not the floor, the truck-bed. A red pick-up, three old Mexicanos in the front, a couple of coolers in the back with him and the guy. The dog—Pepper, Artie was almost sure she was called Pepper, even though he hadn't asked—stood at the far end, ears and tongue flapping, grinning the way dogs did. His mother had told him once that they learned how to smile from people, that domesticated animals mimicked human expressions. The guy followed his gaze to the dog and said, "I tried to rename her Persipnei but she wasn't having it. She knows her name's Pepper. Dogs are funny that way." An ordinary dog, some black lab mutt.

Artie stared at him. In daylight, he looked almost normal, except for the eyes. Worn blue jeans, a cracked leather jacket the color of old hide, scuffed cowboy boots, a black t-shirt that simply read: "BANG!" All of his clothes a little bit faded, as if they had been washed many times, worn out in direct light too often. His skin, too, burnt dark and dry, his lips cracked and peeling, and there was a weird heat coming off him, like someone with a bad sunburn. He could have been anywhere from thirty to forty-five, depending on the angle, but there was something off about his eyes—aside from the strange coloration, they looked too old for his face. The guy smirked a little and Artie realized he'd been staring so he cleared his throat and asked, "Persipnei?"

"There he is," the guy said and he looked back at the dog. She wagged her tail. "Persipnei is the Etruscan queen of the underworld."

Artie nodded. There had been a time when he knew all of *Bullfinch's Mythology* back-to-front and most of the Egyptian gods, too. It was the kind of thing Mom would have had him read; when he was small, she kept him out of school, taught him from the books in the house instead. Quizzed him on state capitals and multiplication tables over dinner. Made him learn French instead of letting him go out for baseball. But that was before. Before she started muttering, before she got that empty look on her face—that she's-gone-away look. “And you?” Artie asked. “Do you have a name?”

The guy licked his lips, clearly thinking it over. Then he smiled. It was not a pleasant expression; the way his skin moved reminded Artie of long-legged insects skittering across the floor. “How about Louis?” he said. “How about that?”

“Louis,” Artie repeated. He couldn't keep the laugh in and the guy—Louis—caught it, his eyebrows coming together over those creepy eyes in confusion. Not the kind of guy who got laughed at much. Artie shrugged at him. “I mean, you give me some fake name, can pick any name in the whole fucking world, and you pick Louis?”

The nameless guy laughed, too, the sound even less pleasant than his smile. “I don't know, man. Just felt right. Louis. Never used that one before. I could be Louis for a while.”

“Well, Louis,” he said. “I'm Artie.” And he stuck out his hand. “Nice to meet you.”

Louis blinked at the extended hand and for a minute, Artie thought he might not take it. He started to lower it. Dumbass, he called himself, feeling cold again. You don't know who the hell this guy is, what really happened, him run out of town, and what?

You're going to laugh and shake his hand? And then Louis took the offered hand in his and Artie remembered how he had touched his shoulder the night before, how warm his skin had been, even through his shirt, but that had been nothing. This, it almost burned, and Louis squeezed his fingers once before pulling away. "Sorry. Tend to run on the hot side."

Artie looked down at his own palms. Remembered again the feeling of his bones breaking, the concrete tearing at him, his motorcycle skidding away. What happened to me? he wanted to ask. How am I really here? I died? he had asked the night before. You're fine now. And maybe he was. So instead he asked—"Okay, Louis, where are we going?"

Louis grinned at him then and if his smile and laughter had been uncomfortable, his grin was terrifying, and Artie didn't quite understand how he knew, but there was screaming behind that grin and naked skulls with gaping empty sockets and broad chattering teeth, and there was something terrible, too, in those off-colored eyes, something predatory, something old and hungry. "Shiloh," Louis said. "We're going to Shiloh."

As it happened, in Alabama, five towns had taken the name Shiloh, and they spent the better part of two days finding the right one—the last and smallest in Fulton County, a cluster of houses and municipal buildings and a shiny park of brand new trailers, all situated at the bottom of a shallow bowl of earth the truck driver called the Valley. Artie, who was West Virginia born and raised, scoffed a little bit at the nickname, thinking of

the towns he had lived in that sat shadowed by the mountains, real mountains, the landslides that happened sometimes, the yellow run-off from the coal mining. Nothing like that in “the Valley,” he imagined. Maybe it got a little soggy when it rained, but that was the whole goddamn state in his experience.

“Know anything about it?” he asked, gestured toward the few bright lights from town.

“They had a bit of that bad weather here last summer,” the driver said. Tough-looking old bastard with a stained Florida Marlins cap. “Guessing they’re not quite over it. Takes a while to get back on your feet out here.” He gestured to what had looked like an ordinary trash heap way off the road, out in the middle of a field, a mountain of junk surrounded by grass, but Artie could see now that it was mostly splintered siding and shingles, tall fluffy piles of pale insulation, some furniture too badly crushed to repair. He knew there had been a rough set of storms, tornados winding down from the sky the year before, but he thought they hit farther north, around Tuscaloosa and Rte. 59, not here in the blank expanse between Montgomery and Mobile.

They’d gotten in the cab of the eighteen-wheeler at the fourth Shiloh, in Pike County, down in the southeastern end of the state, sat squashed along the seat—Louis, then Pepper, then Artie next to the driver. Louis had been quiet for most of the ride, looking out the window at the bluing landscape, asleep maybe, but Artie doubted it. He didn’t seem like the type to close his eyes much. When they got closer to the town, the driver asked, “Let you off here?” And they got out and thanked him, watched the big truck groan away in the opposite direction.

Pepper ran off into the weeds barking, but Louis didn't seem to care much. Instead he started the walk into town, shouldering the guitar case again, boots clocking on the pavement, and what could Artie do but follow? In the fourth Shiloh he had considered going for the nearest bus stop instead of getting into another truck, but he was curious. And wasn't Shiloh, Fulton County, as good a place as any if he needed to split from Louis? He had done it often enough in the past two years, took few odd jobs for gas money, gone on to whatever the next place was until the work ran out again. Of course, his bike was wrecked; he would have to make do with hitching and bus tickets. And there was still the matter of being back from the dead, even if he was trying not to think about it, and once he figured out the right questions, who was there to ask but Louis. He hadn't had a particular place to go in over two years now, not since Mom went into state-run assisted living up in Charleston, so what did it matter if he followed some nameless guy for a while. He walked with Louis into the fifth Shiloh, the sun setting over the lip of the Valley, the sky fading.

The tornados had left most of the main drag alone, the gas station and the corner store and the slack row of houses in town all weathered and intact. But beyond that, if he squinted, he could see what should have been yards and homes, now just bare patches of grass and dirt. They had cleared away most of the debris, piled it together, to burn or salvage he couldn't tell. Something eerie about it, as if half the town had been scraped away, scooped up by some unseen hand. Artie jogged to catch up with Louis and then the dog appeared, walked beside them, light-colored grass tangled in her dark coat. "So,"

Artie said and Louis's head tilted just perceptibly toward to him, as if to say, Yes, I'm listening. "This Shiloh. Not any of the other Shilohs."

"This Shiloh," Louis agreed.

"Why? Why this one—or any of the others?"

Louis stopped walking and Artie stopped with him and they waited there a minute, not looking at each other. A car passed them on the road; the headlights blinded him and he turned his face away. Louis didn't move. Up ahead, the gas station's neon sign glowed. "Say I dreamed it. What do you think of that?" Louis asked, and Artie knew he was testing him.

He thought about the underground lake and the crowd of hands and the voices asking, urging, commanding him to go while he could. Thought about Louis, in dream or memory, coming to him out of the dark and saying, You wanna get out of here? "I'd say I've heard stranger," he replied finally.

Louis didn't smile and Artie was relieved at that, but his mouth did soften, turned up just at the corners. "There's something rotten in the state of Denmark," he said. "Or in Fulton County. It's like I can—" he paused, feeling out the word. "Like I can taste it, you know? Like you can taste snow in the air—or lightning."

"So you go where the dreams tell you? Where you can—ah—taste trouble?" Artie asked. It sounded stranger when he said it. Something about Louis's voice made things sound, if not normal, than serious, real. "And you do what? Help folks sort the trouble out?"

He shrugged. “More or less.” He gestured onward into town—just past the gas station was another sign, bright white, for the Blue Goat bar. Corona pitchers \$5. Then he asked, “Thirsty?” And started walking again, Pepper following him.

Artie lingered a moment, turned over the other questions on his tongue, the ones too weird to voice aloud. You said I was dead—was I really dead? How am I here then? Who are you? And maybe the most troubling, what he most wanted to know and least wanted to ask: why did you help me?

The Blue Goat was like every other dive he’d ever been in: sticky dark wood bar, mirrors along the back wall, the usual tired guys in denim on the stools at the front, a few couples in the cracked leather booths, mostly older women with too much make-up and not enough skirt, a jukebox at the far end playing the same heavy metal and country music, and—in Alabama, at least—the haze of cigarette smoke over everything. Louis went up to the bar and ordered a pitcher, filled two glasses and set one down in front of Artie. “You are old enough to drink, aren’t you?” he asked and laughed and the sound of it made Artie shiver, even in the over-warm room. No one in there spared them a second glance after they sat down, the two of them dirty from the road, but there was something grimy about everyone in there, like they were coated in Alabama clay, like no amount of soap and water would make the place clean—so why bother?

Artie tipped back the glass; the cold, amber liquid felt good on his tongue. It had been, he remembered, surprised, most of a day since he had anything to eat or drink, although he hadn’t been hungry or thirsty in that time. He turned to make some remark

about this to Louis, but that's when the door opened behind them and the two of them turned to look and watch as the three men came in the bar.

If it had been some shitty movie, it would have been a greasy little guy, maybe, and two big goons behind him, burly and dumb-faced in tight black t-shirts with a lot of mean-looking tattoos. Instead, they were all about normal height, in buttoned-up shirts and jeans, newer clothes than on anyone else in there, with neatly cut hair, clean hands. The guy at the front stood a little shorter than the others, and maybe he was on the slight side, a lighter, quicker build, but not the kind of man who needed someone to fight his battles for him. There were muscles under that blue shirt, and something about the way he carried himself gave the impression of competence. This was a man used to accomplishing things, to being listened to and obeyed. Not some corrupt Deep South politician, either; Artie had seen enough of them now to know. No, he was something else. When he passed, the bartender, who had only mumbled to Louis, said, "Evening, Mr. Wallace," and the man in the blue shirt said "Hello, Jim," and the three men went to the back of the bar and sat in the far corner booth.

What was stranger than all of it, Artie decided, was that no one else in the bar had moved when they came in. They didn't look up or pause in their conversations, the way they had when he and Louis showed up. They made a point of not looking at the men as they entered, seemed even a little too absorbed in what was surely the same ordinary talk, the same weak beer they always had.

Louis made a point of not watching them, too; instead he waited while one of the guys, not Mr. Wallace, went up and ordered a pitcher. He gave them another few minutes

to get the beers poured, get talking, and then he pushed back from the bar, all casual, and went to the jukebox. He had, Artie thought, the same bearing as Wallace, that same self-assurance, that impression that whatever he did was deliberate and considered. He punched a few buttons on the juke, put in some quarters, and one of those seventies hard rock songs came up, some guy singing in a soft voice about betraying his friends in the desert for drug money, the lonely sound of the guitar weaving through the bar. Then Louis turned, still relaxed, still easy, and said something to the guys at the table. They responded, Wallace smiling a little, and Louis said something else and they all laughed. Wallace didn't move, but Artie saw one of the other guys flinch when Louis laughed and he knew the feeling and wondered if they saw what he did behind those mismatched eyes, the feeling of something else watching him, assessing him. It was then Louis said another thing and all three of them stiffened—what could he have said to make them all tense up that way?—and one of the other guys moved toward Louis, but then Wallace put a hand up and Louis slid into the booth with them. He beckoned Artie over.

“This is my associate,” he said. Wallace nodded.

“It started with the tornadoes last year,” Wallace explained. He had a strangely delicate voice for a man, his accent suggesting somewhere farther East, maybe near the water. “The government didn't give us much. I'm invested in several local businesses and we've been raising money to rebuild the homes that were lost. Adding to the recovery money, you know. Taking whatever we could out of the revenue, a little at a time.” He gestured behind him, to the back wall, in a way that suggested the rest of the Valley. “Folks have been living in the trailers the state rented us, but it's not what you'd call

ideal, you understand, and it could be a long time before any of those people see their insurance money. The ones that had insurance, of course. Most of us in Shiloh work for the Honda plant over by Thomasville and they've been laying people off steady for the last three years. Hasn't been a good time for anyone lately."

He paused, rubbed a hand over his mouth, maybe thinking about how it had been, maybe just thinking about what was important. Either way, Artie understood that even that gesture was deliberate, considered. He knew better than to ask what Wallace did in the county—probably it involved a dozen things, half of them legal, half of them less so, and if anyone was well off, it was this man. Plenty of drugs shipped through Alabama; his guy for weed in Bethany had told him as much.

"We had one of my guys, Jerry McCord, in charge of the project. Good man, Jerry. I've known him for years—played football together at the county high school, you know. But he was having a rough time of it. Lost a lot in the storms, took a pay-cut last year. Missus was talking about leaving him, taking the kids and moving back in with her parents, even before the bad weather. Anyway, about a week back, we find Jerry in the office, knife in him right here—" He pointed to a place high on his own torso, right between the ribs by the look of it. "And when we did the numbers, there was a chunk of the cash missing, we're not sure how much, but one of the accountants put it at about \$15,000. Went around to his place to let the wife know about it and she didn't know a damn thing. But my guys tell me that Jerry had probably been taking from the fund for a while, a little at a time and that's how they never noticed. Probably he was going to use it to get the hell out of here, start a new life somewhere, as soon as he had enough to do it."

Wallace frowned. Took a long drink from his beer. “We searched the house, searched the office, Jerry’s car, all of it. Dug up half the Valley, too, looking for it. No sign, either, of who put that knife in him. But it’s been hard here, could have been anybody almost, even one of the local cops. They’re not too dirty, but they have families, too, and it’s not easy having a family here what with everything that’s happened.”

Louis was nodding. “It’s been a hard year,” he said. “For everyone. Probably Jerry had someone helping him. Who knew what he was up to. Turned on him in the end.” Wallace murmured agreement. “I can help you,” Louis told them. In the bar’s low lighting his eyes looked almost normal, like they might be the same color. “Find the money and the—the murderer. We’ll do it, you give us a place to sleep until we leave town and enough money to see us off when we do.”

They shook on it.

They went to the butcher’s the next day to see the body—left Pepper tied to a post outside with some water and a bit of dried hoof. Usually the funeral home kept the dead, Wallace had explained, but their facilities were damaged by the storms. The last year, the few dead had been handled in Carroll, the next town over. The butcher took them back to the freezer, where they’d laid Jerry out, well away from the hanging pork ribs and legs of beef and lamb, the meat all pale pink with frost. They had left Jerry in the black body bag. More respectful, the butcher said, and more sanitary, and he left them with the body in the freezer. Artie hugged his arms to his chest; he didn’t have anything other than the t-shirt and jeans he’d been wearing in Bethany. Louis cocked an eyebrow and shrugged out

of his leather jacket, offered it to him without saying anything. Probably it would be stupid to protest. He pulled on the jacket, tried to ignore the way it was still warm from Louis's too-hot skin.

Jerry had been a big man, over six feet tall and heavy-set, a lot of muscle going to fat in the second half of his life. A long white scar jagged across his forehead. Stubble shadowed his jaw and jowls. He wore the same button-up shirt and jeans as Wallace and his men, had the same clean-cut appearance. But there was something about the way his skin drooped under his eyes, the way his mouth dug into the corners of his cheeks, never smiling. He looked tired in a way they hadn't, worn down. He reminded Artie of a P.E. teacher he had had in high school, a big, unhappy man who eventually got fired for sexually harassing a female student. He had always looked tired, too, like it was more than gravity weighing on him, as Artie's mother would have said. Louis was kneeling, pulled back a flap of the shirt and the skin underneath was fish-belly white and there on the side, was a long gash, dragged between the top two ribs. It looked weirdly neat, bloodless, and the knife that had made it must have been very sharp.

"Were you a cop, then?" Artie asked. Or criminal, he thought. Couldn't voice that aloud. It would break the quiet ease they'd maintained since Bethany, Louis leading, Artie following, not asking too many questions. He leaned over Jerry's body, looked for other signs of violence, bruises or broken bones. Didn't think at all about what his own injuries must have looked like under florescent lighting, how his skull showed through his scalp. If he pressed his fingers against his mouth, he thought, maybe, he could feel scars there, and a kind of phantom pain. But he didn't think about it. Didn't.

“A cop?” Louis asked. He poked at the wound. Leaned over, pried Jerry’s eyelids opened, looked at the opaque scleras. Stooped, as if listening, over the closed up mouth. “Nope.”

“How do you know about forensics, then?”

He straightened, looked over at Artie, blinked. “I don’t know a fucking thing about forensics.”

“Then how the hell are you going to figure out who did this?” Artie asked, a little angry.

He ripped a piece of the shirt off, the pocket, and stuffed it in his jeans. “I know people. What they’re thinking. What they want. You know. I just wanted to see the body, see if anything else had been done to it. But it looks okay, doesn’t it? Not messy at all.” Louis gestured over the corpse. “So. You hear anything?”

“Hear anything?” he repeated. “Like what?”

“Nothing in particular. Talking maybe.”

“Talking.”

“There a fucking echo in here?” Louis asked, but his voice was calm. Amused, even.

“No,” Artie said. “I don’t hear anything. Not talking. Nothing.” There was just the sound of the freezer cycling cold air through.

“Hm,” Louis said and started out of the room. Left him to pull the sides of the body bag up and zip it over Jerry’s sad frozen face. Artie lingered in the room for a moment, listening. No, not whispers. Just the air cycling.

“Why did you ask? About the talking.”

“No reason.”

They walked back out into the bright sun and it was just March but already well into the eighties. Pepper greeted them, panting, tail wagging, and barked once. Bounced on her front feet, ready to run around. Artie crouched and patted her on the head, scratched her behind the ears. He looked into her eyes, ordinary brown dog’s eyes—just happy, intelligent, yes, but no more so than they had a right to be, the eyes of something young and temporary. He untied her from the post and she bounded toward a man coming up the street, sniffing at his pant leg. He didn’t kick her away, didn’t acknowledge her at all really, and she followed him over, a bearded, middle-aged guy in dirty blue jeans, a stained t-shirt, and work boots.

“Hey there,” he said. Smiled behind his beard. Burst blood vessels around the nose, that rosy alcoholic’s look. “You must be the new guys in town. Working for Wallace, I heard?”

“Didn’t think that was common knowledge,” Louis said. He ignored the man’s hand, extended to him. Artie shook it instead. A big calloused hand, more like a paw. No delicate work there.

“I hear things, is all,” the man said and Artie recognized him from the night before, one of the men slumped over the bar at the Blue Goat. “I’m Tom. Tom Haxby. Lived just down the street there. Used to work over at Honda but they downsized again this year, bunch of us lost our jobs, just like Wallace said—”

Artie stopped him. “You were listening,” he said.

“Sometimes it’s hard not to hear,” Tom said. “Occupational hazard.”

“I bet,” Louis said. He was giving Tom a cold look that Artie hadn’t seen on him the last few days, dismissive, maybe even angry. If Tom noticed, if he felt those old eyes on him, he didn’t give any sign. “Help you with anything, Tom?”

The older man blinked. “Thought you might want to pay Casey a visit, is all. She’s over in the trailer park with the others,” he said. He leaned closer and Artie could smell the stale yeasty rot of his breath. He tried not to cough and pull away. “Casey Darry was Jerry’s girl, you know. Linda was his wife, but Casey was his girl. Bet you anything she knows who did it.”

“Right then, thank you,” Louis said. “We’ll do that.” He grabbed Artie just above the elbow, and pulled him away, down the street, Pepper following them.

There were about fifty mobile homes altogether, in five neat rows. No time for porches or planters to collect around them, just bare metal in the dirt out behind Shiloh. Not like the trailers he knew from home, the wheels off most of them, not going anywhere ever, just sitting on concrete blocks in the grass. He and Mom had lived in one for well over a year, the year she started getting sick after he had finished high school and he had come home from work more than once to find her sitting on the trailer’s steps, just wearing a short silk-robe, her unshaven legs sticking out from under the flimsy fabric. The soles of her feet would be dirty from the garden she was planting out front, tomato plants and high-crawling beans, but also marigolds and peonies and glorybowers, her favorites, long rows of little white and purple heart-shaped flowers bending toward the

ground. Right before it got too bad for her to stay out there by herself, she'd uprooted all of them and shredded the petals into little piles. He wondered if anyone had called to tell her what happened, if there had been time before he came back, if anyone would have bothered to find out if he had a next of kin.

"Coming?" Louis asked and Artie realized he'd been standing there on the edge of the trailers, looking down the long silvery row of them. He shook himself and followed the other man, Pepper on their heels.

Casey Darry lived at the end of the second row, her trailer identical to all the others and she came to the door wearing a dress patterned with big yellow sunflowers. "Help you?" she asked. Older than Artie might have expected for someone's "girl," only a little younger than Jerry had been, he thought, about forty, probably, deep grooves around her mouth. Marked by the same hardship as everyone else in Shiloh, her house and most of her possessions gone, and all of that written in her skin. She was fit, though, and Artie admired the shape of her under her dress.

"Good afternoon, ma'am," Louis said, his voice very gentle. He had put on, Artie noticed, something of a Southern accent, softened his vowels, blurred his consonants. "We were hoping you might help us." He leaned a little closer, spoke so quietly only Casey could hear him.

"Wallace sent you?" she asked. Invited them in when they nodded.

They stepped into the neat confines of the trailer, the kitchen small but tidy, dishes draining next to the sink. A boy, about ten, played on the floor with a set of jacks, the plastic kind they sell at Dollar General. "That's my son, Ethan," Casey said. "Say

hello, Ethan.” The boy obeyed without looking up. “Get you some iced tea?” she asked and went to take some glasses from a shelf before they could answer.

When she had settled, they sat in the kitchen. Louis took one of Casey’s hands in his, looked her straight in the eye. She didn’t flinch at his touch; in fact, her fingers curled a little around his. “I didn’t know what he was up to, honest to goodness, I didn’t. Jerry and I haven’t been together for a while,” she told them. Her face was plain and open as she spoke. Not a woman accustomed to lying, Artie decided, but it was strange, how easy it was to get the story out of her. “We didn’t end it officially or anything, but after the tornadoes there was so much going on. Jerry and Linda moved in with Linda’s folks and Ethan I moved out here. I mean, you’ve seen that pile of stuff out there, the mess those storms made. It’s hardly been a time for love affairs, you know.” She looked back at the boy playing on the carpet. “Ethan wasn’t his,” she added. “In case you were wondering. I still liked him, you know, even though we stopped seeing each other. I had no cause to kill him.”

Louis patted her hand. “Didn’t think you did, ma’am,” he said. “A question—did Linda, did Jerry’s wife know about you two? What had been going on?”

“We didn’t parade around in front of her or anything,” Casey said. “But Shiloh’s a little place. Everybody knows everything about everybody, I guess. Someone told her, I’ll bet, but she never said anything to me, never made a scene. She’s a good woman, Linda. A real lady.”

“Tom Haxby—you know him?—told us he had some idea of where Jerry might have hid the cash.” Artie stiffened when he said this, but tried not to give anything away.

Casey wasn't looking at him anyway, only looking at Louis and her expression went soft and dazed like a girl with a crush. "You have any idea where he might have put it?"

She leaned in. "We met out at this abandoned house sometimes," she confided. "It'd belonged to Jerry's grandmother but it was condemned. The storms didn't hurt it much."

Louis smiled and released her hand. "That's just perfect," he said. "That's exactly what I needed to know," he told her.

She drew back a little from the table at his smile, awake, it seemed, suddenly, and she saw something in Louis's face that bothered her. She cast a troubled glance at her son. Calculating, maybe, if she could get between Ethan and Louis if she needed to—she didn't spare Artie a second look. She glared. "What did you say your names were?" she asked. Confused. Like someone who had been sleepwalking.

"Oh, we're just friends of the community," Louis said then and his voice was all business, the warm Southern tones gone. "Thank you for your time."

Artie followed him out of the trailer, jogged to catch up with him. Pepper dashed up to them, a broken bit of siding in her mouth and Louis tossed it away for her. She brought it back and this time he took it, turning it over and over in his hands.

"What did you do to her?" Artie asked.

"Mm," Louis said. "What?"

"Casey Darry. She just told you everything, you barely had to ask her anything."

"I told you, I'm good at people," he said. Shrugged. They walked out of the trailers. A few curtains twitched, shades pulled just back, eyes looking out. Wary eyes.

“Yeah, but this is Alabama,” Artie said. “People don’t just tell you the truth when you ask. ‘Specially when they don’t know you.”

“Who said she was telling the truth?” Louis asked. “She told me what she thought I wanted to know.” He looked over at Artie and laughed; Artie tried not to wince. “What? You think I hypnotized her or something?” He wagged one hand over Pepper’s eyes. She jumped and barked. “Yes, Pepper, tell me all your secrets. Good dog.”

Their interview with Jerry McCord’s widow the next day was even shorter and stranger. Linda lived in town with her aging parents and she sat with Louis and Artie in a neatly appointed living room—tea cozies and sofas with pink roses and small, delicate looking porcelain figures on the bookshelf and carpets that were vacuumed often and little rugs that Linda’s mother must have made. They sat with the tea Linda brought them in long thin glasses patterned with leaves. Louis didn’t touch her; in fact, he made of show of keeping his hands away from her. Winked at Artie. It wasn’t as frightening as his smiles, more just unsettling. “Did your husband tell you about the money?”

“No. But about a month ago, I got the feeling that something wasn’t right with Jerry,” Linda answered promptly. She had worn a pearl necklace to the door and her skin was very clean and unlined. “It’s been very difficult here lately, you understand. Makes people desperate. But I told him. I told Jerry that it would get better. That there was no reason to panic. Wallace had trusted him, after all, and that means a lot here, to be good with Wallace. I told him we were doing just fine here. Not like some people losing their

houses. I said, don't do anything stupid. But I guess he had already been doing something stupid."

"Did you think about telling Wallace you suspected there was something wrong? See if he could put a stop to it? Talk to Jerry?" Louis asked.

She shifted a little on the couch, not so much that it made a noise, but her skirts rustled, just enough, like petals in the breeze. She folded her hands—white gloves, Artie noticed, like he'd seen women wear to church as a child. "I probably should have," she admitted. "But it didn't seem right, outing Jerry like that, especially when I only had my suspicions. I thought—I thought it would be better to just convince him to do the right thing when the time came. He was a very easy man to convince of things, you know. We barely fought at all."

"I hate to embarrass you, ma'am," Louis said then. He may have even blushed, Artie thought, but it was difficult to tell with the tan. "But did you know your husband was in a extramarital relationship with Casey Darry?"

Linda McCord cleared her throat. "I don't want to talk about that," she said.

Louis nodded. "I understand—and I am sorry. Thank you for your time, Mrs. McCord, and for the tea." They rose to leave then and she showed them out. At the door, Louis stopped and turned. "One more question. Tom Haxby mentioned to us that he had a good idea of where your husband hid the money, but we have been unable to verify his statement. Do you have an idea of where he may have put it?"

She smiled and shook her head. "I'm afraid I don't. Tom was probably just telling stories—he gets things mixed up now, what with—well, you know. That poor man. He's

lost so much since the storms. Did you know that he used to head the sheriff's department? He was going to run next term. We've had a rough year all of us, but no one more than Tom Haxby, bless him."

Louis and Artie thanked her again and went out into the street.

"Well," Louis said. "Am I still a hypnotist?"

"Why do you keep telling them about—about what Tom Haxby said?" Artie asked. "Even if—don't you think that's exactly the kind of thing we shouldn't say?"

"We'll go to the site tomorrow night, just after sundown," Louis declared loudly. "We'll have Tom show us where to go this time." He grinned at Artie. Standing there in the hot sun, he remembered the cave, the sound of dripping water, the voices saying "go" and Louis's face coming out of the dark.

That night they went back to the cabin Wallace had provided and Louis took his guitar out of the black case for the first time since Artie had met him. It wasn't, he realized, a guitar at all, but a bass, a black electric bass, sleek and smooth as oil. "Didn't know you were a musician," he said and Louis didn't smile, looked a little sad, even. He went out to the porch with the bass and sat in one of the old rocking chairs. Pepper sat at his feet; her pink tongue lolled out of her mouth. Artie looked around the spare little room, where they were staying, just two twin beds covered in quilts, nothing of theirs to mark it. Their first day in town, he had washed his clothes in the bathroom sink, sat on the edge of the tub with a towel around his waist and thought, this is all I own in the world. No money in his wallet, just the driver's license bearing the photo of a man who

had died once and it was strange looking back into his own eyes when they didn't know what he knew.

He went out onto the porch and sat in the chair and looked out at the Valley. Gray storm clouds rolled in quick above the small, frail-looking houses and the rows of round trailers; lightning flashed just over the horizon. He wondered if the people of Shiloh flinched whenever one of the frequent Alabama thunderstorms came through. Or maybe they couldn't afford to think that way, maybe they could only manage one day at a time, no matter if they heard rain on their roofs or the wind blew or someone took what little money they had gathered to scramble up from the dust. Thunder growled in the distance. Water fell from the sky, first just a little, then a lot, curtains of rain descending on the Valley. Next to him, Louis started to play and it should have been low flat sounds without an amp, barely any sound at all but instead the notes came out rich and deep and full, never mind that the bass was a background instrument, not something you led with. They sat for a while and Louis played song after song, each of them buzzing in Artie's chest like a heartbeat and louder than the rain and wind and thunder. When the weather had passed, they sat quiet, him and Louis and Pepper, and Louis brought out a smushed pack of cigarettes and a little box of matches, offered him one, and they smoked in silence and watched the dark Valley, saw a headlight pass on the road, a porch light flick on in town, the fireflies blink yellow out beyond the houses. Pepper's tail thumped on the floorboards.

"So why did we come here?" Artie asked for a while. "I know you said you had—a taste—that things were wrong. But what about it? Why bother trying to help?"

“Seems like the thing to do.” He shrugged and Artie didn’t see it so much as feel it. “Might as well, right? I mean, why not?”

They were quiet again and it was dark except for the red ends of the cigarettes and it was still except for the steady tide of Pepper’s breathing.

“Who are you?” Artie asked.

“I—” Louis said and paused for dramatic effect. “I am Batman.”

They both laughed and Artie thought maybe that Louis’s laugh wasn’t so bad when you couldn’t see his face. It sounded almost normal. “Shut up,” Artie said but he didn’t mean it. “Seriously. Are you like—fuck, what—Christ on the road or something?” He didn’t believe in any of that, even when Mom had brought him to church, but with everything that had happened in the last week or so it seemed possible at least, that there were things he didn’t understand, maybe powerful things in the world.

Louis snorted. “Nope.”

“But I died.”

“Yes.”

“I *died*, man.”

“Yes, you did. But you’re okay now. Trust me.”

Artie wondered if he did trust Louis. It seemed wrong to trust a man he hardly knew, a liar, a criminal most likely, a man with no name and no homeland, with monsters behind his eyes and death in his smile. Then he asked the one question he hadn’t quite managed to ask. “Why did you help me? You know, in the cave? Why did you lead me out of there?”

“You remember the cave.”

“Yeah—there were people. Voices. I heard them. I hear them when I’m sleeping sometimes. They told me to go. Now I don’t know what they’re saying.”

Louis muttered something. Then he said, “I helped you because you asked me to, because you wanted to go. I’ve done it before, led people out of there. It’s—not a good place, you know?” He shrugged again. Artie could almost see the gleam of his eyes in the dark, but he couldn’t tell which was brown and which was blue. He sensed that Louis wasn’t looking at him, was looking past him, out into the nothing. “And it helps, sometimes, to have an extra pair of hands, someone to have your back. And you seemed like a good guy to help, not someone with a lot of baggage.”

There was what he didn’t quite say, too, which Artie already knew, which was that it got lonely on the road, going from town to town the way they did, that sometimes, just sometimes you wanted to hear a voice that wasn’t your own, to see a friendly face, to sit and smoke on a porch after the rain. He reached out across the dark space between them and put a hand on Louis’s shoulder, the strange warmth of his skin coming through the leather jacket.

The next day was a baking dry day, all the moisture gone from the air and they waited the worst of it out in the shade. When the sun dipped low in the sky—not quite twilight, but just before—they walked out to the trash heap, came around the long way from the rim of the Valley and it would have been easier than anything for someone watching from town to track their progress. Artie studied the heap as they approached,

the pile of broken pieces of other people's homes, piled wood and insulation and broken drywall and ripped free linoleum, everything the tornado had torn loose when it tracked across the Valley, the only lasting sign of the devastation it had brought. The trash heap was alone in the field beyond Shiloh and it took a while to reach it from town. They stepped through the high grass, Pepper following, her tail wagging. Tom Haxby was waiting for them by the pile, wearing a neat-pressed brown uniform from the sheriff's office, arms folded over his stomach. He greeted them when they arrived. "What's all this about, guys? I could have met you in town, no problem, you know."

"It's safer just now for you to be out here with us," Louis explained. "Some people might be thinking you know some things you don't."

"Why would they think that?" Tom asked, but Louis didn't respond.

"Pepper," he said and whistled, a strange trilling whistle he hadn't used before, and the dog went bounding over to the heap, digging at a pyramid of broken furniture. "Mutts really are the best dogs," Louis said. "See, Pepper, she's very good at digging," he explained. "And she has an excellent sense of smell. Not as good as a bloodhound, mind, but I let her get a good whiff of Jerry McCord's shirt." After a minute, she quit digging and barked, extended one paw, her back arched straight, nose pointing into the rubbish. "And she finds things. Artie, go have a look at what Pepper found for us."

He went to the hole and brushed the dirt away, shifted back what must have been someone's kitchen table once, where they'd sat and had meals and maybe the kids did their homework. There at the bottom of the shallow hole, he saw a corner of dull gray

metal. He reached in and pulled it out, blew debris from the top. A locked strongbox. He shook it, heard something solid move inside, bills stacked and bound.

“They’re going to burn all this at some point, aren’t they?” Louis asked and Tom Haxby, who nodded. “Love that about this place. Everyone burns their garbage. It would have been easy, before the bonfire, to come out here and dig up the box, leave town while everyone was making speeches about moving forward and rising from the ashes and all that bullshit. Jerry McCord didn’t have a bad plan, not at all, but he didn’t count on one thing. Or two.”

They came then, from opposite sides of the heap, one from the trailers and the other from town, Casey Darry and Linda McCord, the both of them in their nice afternoon dresses. They looked at Tom Haxby and then at Louis and Artie, confused. Artie blinked and Louis smiled that uncomfortable smile of his. “He didn’t count on his wife and his girl trying to kill him.” The women stared at each other, startled. “His wife to take the money for herself—she was going to leave him anyway, remember? She didn’t *want* to stay with him after the affair but she didn’t want to be stuck at her parents’ house in town either and when she figured it out about the money, she saw her chance. His girl did it because she thought he was going back to the woman he married, would probably leave town with her and she would have nothing, less than nothing with her house gone, just her and her son. A crime of convenience and a crime of—well, love, I guess. Which is why Linda, you poisoned him, and Casey, you stabbed him after the fact—even though he didn’t bleed much. Which is,” he explained, turning to Artie, “why Mrs. McCord was so calm when we visited her and why Ms. Darry was on very powerful

sedatives. It's also why neither of them knew where the money was buried, because Jerry didn't tell either of them, so they both followed Officer Haxby here." He returned his attention to the women. "Now, Mrs. McCord, if you would please go with Officer Haxby so he can take your statement. Ms. Darry, I think you should go home to your boy." He nodded at her.

Artie handed the strongbox to Haxby. "Wallace will be wanting this back, I guess," the big man said. "Little as it is. Hope it can get a few folks back on their feet."

Pepper and Artie and Louis watched the three of them walk away. The dog sat on her haunches and barked at the towering heap of rubble, everything the people of Shiloh had lost. Louis looked over at the heap and took his small box of matches out of his jacket pocket, slid one from the cardboard. "What do you think?" he asked. "Has this stuff haunted this place long enough?" And when Artie nodded, he drew the match along the side and it caught with a sharp hiss and he flicked the lit match into the pile. There was smoke and then the beginning of a flame crawling over the side of the useless pieces the storm had left behind. And he wondered then, if that had been the point all along, not to save the people of Shiloh, because they were still stuck with damn little, or even to solve Wallace's problem, but to the burn away the dead flesh, to start new again, leave nothing but ashes behind them. As the fire grew and the sunset overtook the sky, the light flickered orange and red, lit up the planes of Louis's face, and Artie saw his mouth was stretched open in that horrible grin and he wondered again, just who he had gotten mixed up with—and then he settled in next to him, looked out over the heap of other people's lives and watched it burn.